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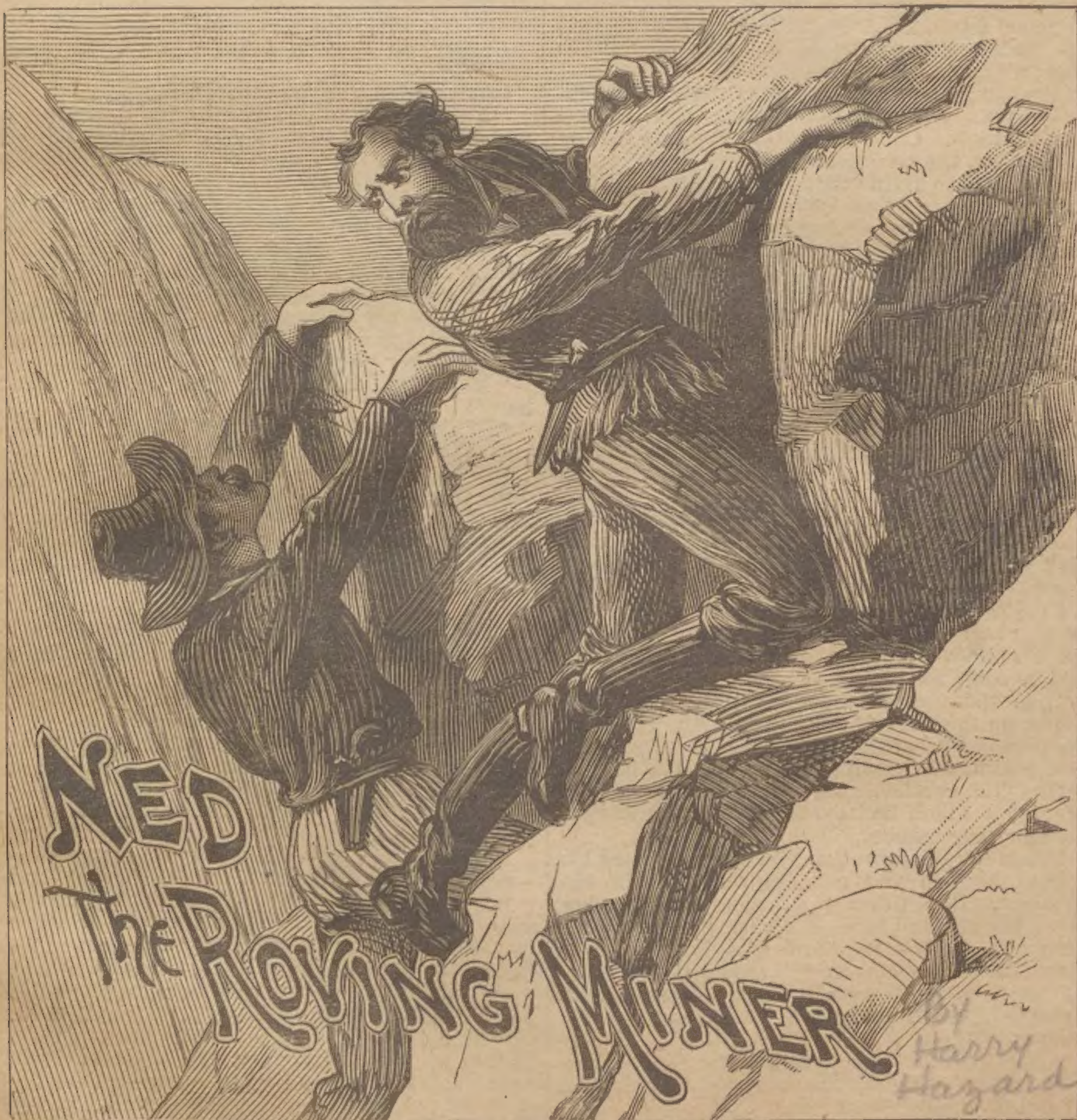
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"FOLLOW ME, BOYS!" HE SHOUTED. "UP—UP THE ROCKS!"

Ned, the Roving Miner;

OR,

ARKANSAW JACK'S MATCH.

BY HARRY HAZARD,

AUTHOR OF "DUSKY DICK'S DUEL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN-HUNTERS.

It was nearly sunset of a warm, sultry day in July, a man was slowly toiling along through a narrow California valley.

In form tall and symmetrically built, the young man was dressed in a rough and not over-clean garb; heavy duck trousers, and flannel shirt, thrown open at the breast, and a battered, slouched felt hat. A broad leather belt clasped his waist and supported a brace of "Colt's Navys," and a heavy-bladed knife.

Strapped upon his shoulders were a rough-looking knapsack, a small pick, and several smaller tools. Considering the time, the section of country, the accouterments and dress, it was not difficult to divine that the pedestrian was a miner out upon a prospecting tour.

"It is curious where the boys can have gone to," muttered the miner, seating himself upon a boulder, and slowly filling a well-stained pipe. "I don't believe that I have missed the road, but one of us have, that's plain, for there has been no person along here before me, to-day, I would swear," and he cast his eyes keenly over the open space before him.

Just then there came an interruption that caused him to spring to his feet in well-founded alarm, while his right hand drew a revolver with an adroitness that told how familiar he was with the weapon.

This interruption came in the shape of a pistol-shot, and, as it sounded in his ears, it was mingled with the peculiar hissing of a bullet that passed close above his head.

The Roving Miner cast a keen, searching glance around him, half-crouching in readiness for instant action, should it prove necessary. But still he could see nothing.

Then there came a loud, hoarse laugh, and following the unexpected sound with his gaze, the prospector beheld a herculean form, dressed in a rough, nondescript garb, upon the hillside before him, carelessly toying with a large revolver, from which had evidently been discharged the alarming missile.

Quick as thought the young man raised his cocked weapon and covered the form of the stranger. But, although his eye was glancing along the polished tube, in direct line with the stranger's left breast, there was no evidence of alarm upon that personage's part, and not a little surprised at his *nonchalance*, the young man hesitated for a moment, and finally lowered his weapon without its being discharged.

"Hellow thar, young fellow!" cried out the man upon the hillside, in a rough, hoarse, but withal not unpleasing voice.

"Halloo yourself!" retorted the first comer.

"What the deuce do you mean by shooting at me, anyhow?"

"Didn't skeer you, did it? You's good on the jump, stranger, anyhow. Ekil to a jack-rabbit, you is; haw-haw-ho!" laughed the queer customer.

"Never mind now, whether I was scared or not," angrily returned the miner, nervously fingering his weapon. "What did you shoot at me for? *that's* the question!"

"You're new to the mines, I reckon?"

"Look here, my grizzly bear friend; I have asked you a plain question, and you had better give me a plain answer, or you may find that I can aim a pistol quite as handy as you can; and I never pull twice upon the same mark."

"Now don't b'ile over, youngster, nor ruffle up your feathers, for I'm a rooster what don't skeer wu'th a cent, and my spurs is full-growed, *they* is," coolly returned the other, rising from his seat and approaching the prospector, at the same time replacing his pistol in its scabbard. "Nuther do I when I burn power in dead airnest."

"Then what did you mean?"

"I knowed you was new to the mines, an' I reckon you hain't l'arned all the customs yit. I was jist axin' you good-evenin'," laughed the burly specimen of humanity.

"Indeed? well, then, hereafter when you wish to salute me, please use your voice instead, for a man don't like to stand a target for pistol-balls. At least I don't," returned the young miner, clasping the proffered hand.

"It's just my way, an' I don't mean no harm by it, so'f I give you any 'fense, I axes pardin. You've never heerd tell o' me, ther?"

"Not that I know of. Who are you, anyhow?"

"Why I'm 'Arkansaw Jack'—Jack Gabriel, you know, from Washita Flats."

"Well, Mr. Arkansaw Jack, if it is just the same to you, we will dispense with your usual style of address whenever we chance to meet hereafter, for, I assure you, it is not the most pleasant thing imaginable, this being roused up with a revolver-bullet playing music in one's ear."

"Swallow me up in a sand-storm, youngster, but you mouth them jaw-breakers mighty peart. You ain't a schoolmarm, be ye?"

"No," laughed the young miner.

"Nor a preacher man, nuther?"

"I am only Ned Payson a roving miner from Georgia. But, say, have you seen anything of half a dozen men about here, any time to-day?"

"Only my own gang. You're on the prospect, ain't you?"

"A little that way. But you said your gang—what are you doing here, mining?"

"Not muchly, I ain't. I'm in bigger business now. But say, if you ain't got nothin' better to do, come along with me, an' I'll give you a knock down to as fine a lot of skylarks as ever you met. Grub plenty, sech as it is, an' lick an' tobac throwed in, all free for nothin'. What d'y' say?"

"I'll go, and thank you, too. A supper of nothing, with only cold water to wash it down, does not suit my taste, and that is all I expected to have to-night," laughed Payson.

"Le's travel, then. But say, won't you j'ine us? It's bully fun, an' then I've tuck a shine to you, freeze me ef I hain't. Be you 'shoal on the bar? Ef so, hyar's my puss; help yourself. 'Tain't very fat jest now, but it's at your welkim, what thar is of it," earnestly said Arkansaw Jack.

"I have a little left yet, friend Jack, but I thank you all the same. But what 'd you say you were in now?"

"Man-huntin'."

"What!" exclaimed Ned, with a start.

"No, not *that*, but man-huntin', don't you understand? We—that is me and my pardners—is out after that pesky Joe Quin, or Walk-in, whatever's his outlandish name, an' his gang. I tell you it's bully fun, jest. We've hed one turn-up with 'em a'ready, but the boss then, a white-livered Yankee, turned tail, an' we got the wu'st on it. 'Leven good fellers, besides Yank, went under, an' I only got cl'ar by the skin o' my teeth.

"The rest was down, an' I an' Three-Fingered Jack had it hot an' heavy, t'others a-settin' still, lookin' on. We war a-hoss-back, an' I knowed thet ef I stayed, win or lose, it'd be a die anyhow, so I turned an' made tracks.

"They war after me full split, but I war best mounted, an' kep' the lead. Fu'st kim Jack, then Joe Quin an' the riff-raff. Fer five miles, good, we raced, and fifty times, ef once, Three-Fingers war so cluss to me thet he raised his knife, but every time, I would speak to old Slug, an' as I left 'em, how the Greaser 'd cuss.

"I didn't 'zactly like to run, but they war a good dozen still, an' I knowed thet in a rough-an'-tumble I'd be nowhar, so I kep' on. Wal, to cut it short, I jest naturally left 'em until they g'in up. In two weeks I was sound as ever."

"I heard of the affair at the time, but had forgotten your name. So you concluded to try it again?"

"Bet yer life I did! an' will, tell one or t'other is wiped out. Arkansaw Jack niver yit owned up whipped, an' he won't begin now by lettin' a Greaser outbrag him. But looky, thar ar' the boys now."

Following the direction indicated by the adventurer's arm, the young prospector observed a camp situated upon a little knoll, and could distinguish the forms of men and horses. The former were scattered around in attitudes of careless ease, smoking, playing cards or sleeping, while two others were upon the higher ground, apparently acting as sentinels.

"Thar's the best, dare-devilinst crowd of fellers that kin be gathered together on the whole Passific (he evidently meant Pacific) Slope!" proudly exclaimed Arkansaw, his eyes lighting up with a fire as he spoke. "Nary a backdown or crawfish in the gang, but all cl'ar grit to the backbone. Ef Joaquin bucks ag'inst us now, we'll rake the persimmings, shore!"

In a few moments the two men had gained the camp, and the burly leader was greeted boisterously by his comrades, with whom he evidently was a favorite. They eyed the young stranger curiously, but did not address him, evidently awaiting for Arkansaw Jack to explain.

"Look hyar, fellers, do you see this 'ere

youngster? Wal, he's my friend, an' so, natu'ly, he's *yourn*, too. He's called Georgia Ned," quoth Arkansaw.

The mountaineers, one and all, pressed around and cordially shook hands with the new-comer, each man greeting him with characteristic expressions, and introducing themselves by either their real names or the fancy ones they had received. And if their *personnel* was strange, their titles were none the less so.

There was Pet Pete, John Chinaman, Lazy Sam, Slippery Jeems, Hoosier Tom, Old Rye, Corn Cracker, and others equally euphonious, while one freckled hero sported the name of "Turkey Egg."

In a short time the party were all busily engaged in discussing their evening meal, consisting mostly of fresh meat, moistened with "corn-juice" or old rye. Ned was not so preoccupied but that he found time to closely scrutinize each one of his new companions, beginning with Arkansaw Jack, or Gabriel, who looked the very *beau ideal* of a hardy miner or mountaineer.

The others were generally of the same class, with few exceptions, and formed a body of men that would be hard to surpass for strength, dexterity and courage. The Roving Miner felt that with such a band, the fate of Joaquin was but a question of time.

After the meal was over, the man-hunters ignited their pipes and ranged around the cheerful fire. Payson joined them and listened curiously to their conversation, interesting from more causes than one.

At perhaps an hour after dark, the shrill sound of a peculiar whistle rung down the valley, causing the group around the camp-fire to pause in their mirth and listen intently. It was repeated, when Arkansaw Jack said:

"It's Whistlin' Dick. Now we'll know what we've got afore us for to-night."

The personage called Whistling Dick soon made his appearance, accompanied by one of the sentinels, and was warmly greeted by his comrades.

"Whar's the grub, boys?" he exclaimed, snuffing the air in a ludicrous manner. "Bet yer life I feel wolfish! Got a holler inside hyar and could chuck a grizzly in, leavin' plenty o' room for him to kick."

"Hold a bit, Dick," interrupted Arkansaw. "Business afore pleasure. Tell us what you've found out, fu'st."

"Won't do, cap'n, 'thout you say you'll let me hev time to load up fu'st, afore you say tramp."

"Go on, then. You kin hev an hour, ef so be you need it," impatiently cried Jack.

"Bully boy! Well—I've found Joaquin!"

"What—where—are you sure?" were some of the excited queries of the entire party, who crowded around the scout, eager to hear every word, Payson among the number.

Whistling Dick bore his honors in a manner anything but meek, and evidently appreciated the importance with which he was invested. He gazed loftily around upon the excited faces and motioned them back in a dignified manne with one grimy hand, while the other was st' akimbo.

"Take it easy, my chickens; don't hev a fit an' step in it! Will you hev the ge-lorious news now, or wait till I get ready?"

"Bah! I don't b'lieve that you've seen Joaquin no more'n that you've bin up to the moon!" exclaimed Arkansaw Jack, walking away in an indifferent manner. "But go on."

"Wal, for the others I will, but you kin close your ears. Ye see, boys, I was prospectin' around, sorter loose an' keerless like, when I hunkered down on top of a ridge to rest my trotters an' take a comf'able smoke, when purty soon I sighted a grist o' fellers down the valley, a-critterback."

"They war Greasers as I 'spected, an' a more o'nery, villingous set I never sot eyes onto, jest fourteen in number. They had bin in a scrimmage o' some sort, for more'n one o' them was tied up with bloody rags. Then I tuck a long look at the wimmen critters."

"Talk about angels! Ef the younger one o' them thar petticoats don't jest knock spots outen any one thet ever I hearn tell on, then I'll cave!"

"Never mind that now, but tell us about Joaquin," impatiently interrupted Arkansaw.

"He was thar, a gre't, tall, ugly-lookin', dar'-devil—"

"Bah! you're looney, Whistlin' Dick," angrily said the leader of the man-hunters. "Joaquin is not bigger'n Ned, thar, slim-built, an' with as good a lookin' mug onto him as ever war made."

"I don't keer; he's thar, anyhow," muttered Whistling Dick, somewhat disconcerted.

"Wal, we'll soon find out. Boys, I'll go—"

"Hold on, Cap, I forgot. Them wimmen-folks is in limbo," hastily added the spy.

"What?"

"They is pris'ners, or else why war they a-settin' down onto the ground, with tha'r ankils tied up?"

"You fellers!" exclaimed Arkansaw Jack in an excited tone, "what're you goin' to do? You've heard what Dick says, an' now shell we let them dirty Greasers, as he says they be, treat them splendiferous female-critters as he calls 'em, thet-a-way? or shell we jest walk into the raskils an' sot t'others free? Mebbe one o' them might want a husband, an' take a shine to one of us; just think o' thet!"

There was but one answer, and the voice of "Georgia Ned" was prominent among the rest. They would free the women at any risk, and the majority of the man-hunters were only too eager for a brush with the hated and despised Mexicans, not to seize with avidity upon any pretext to satisfy their animosity.

"Whistler, do you lead the way, an' quick, too, for there's no tellin' what devilment thim cat-amounts 'll be up to, and we mustn't be too late. Take a hunk o' meat an' eat it as you show us the way to whar you fu'st sighted the var-mints," ordered Arkansaw Jack, and then the fire was extinguished and the little party were soon proceeding at a steady trot under guidance of the scout.

Payson was mounted behind one of the men, and felt a nervous impatience as he puzzled his brain in trying to solve the mystery of the two women's appearance in that wild and remote portion of the country. But his fancies were

abruptly dispersed as the guide announced their arrival at the hill from whence he had first observed the party of Mexicans.

"You wait here, then, boys, while we go up an' see which ar' the best way to strike. Don't stir, or speak above a cat's whisper. Come, Whistler, and then the two men cautiously scaled the precipitous hill and lay prone upon its summit."

"Look! Thar they be," muttered Dick, as the bright light of a camp-fire below them met their gaze.

"Yas, an' I kin see the wimmen critters, too," rejoined Arkansaw, in the same tone. "We must try the crick, I reckon."

"It's the only show, for the moon is too bright to cross the open."

Without any further remarks the little party proceeded, and were soon cautiously advancing along the bed of the creek, whose icy cold water reached nearly to their waists. They were forced to proceed in a crouching posture, in order to keep below the level of the valley, for fear lest the bright light of the full moon might betray them to some watchful eye in the Mexican camp, and thus frustrate their hopes of a surprise.

After perhaps a quarter of an hour spent in this manner, the desired position was gained, and then each man stealthily raised his eyes to the level of the bank, and gazed curiously upon the scene that lay before them.

The ground was smooth and level until the rocky hills towered up high in the rear, and the scene was fully lighted up by the cheerful blaze of a large fire. Around it were grouped a number of men, clad for the most part in the picturesque garb of the native Californian, busily engaged in playing cards.

A little to one side, and shrinking close together, as if for mutual protection, were the two captive women. Their hands and feet were bound, and their garments were soiled and tattered as if they had been forced to endure a long and toilsome journey.

Their faces were thrown into deep shadow by their position, but still Ned fancied that one of them was young and of more than ordinary attractions. The Arkansaw muttered, in a subdued tone of intense disgust:

"They's playin' monte for the captives, the unmanly pups! Spot the men afore you, an' when I holler, just drap 'em an' make a rush. Don't let one git away."

Noiselessly the deadly revolvers were cocked and leveled at the group of unsuspecting gamblers, who, deeply absorbed in their game, upon which such novel stakes depended, little dreamed of the fearful retribution that was so soon to overtake them. Then came a wild yell from Arkansaw, a deafening report, a blinding flash; then the man-hunters scrambled as best they might from their uncomfortable position, and dashed toward the fire through clouds of smoke.

But there was little work for them to do. Several forms were seen darting away into the shadows, and a few stray shots were discharged in the direction taken, but without success, and no one offered to start in pursuit; for they well knew how useless would be such a course among the rocky defiles, at night.

The terrified women had not uttered a sound, and were now gazing in bewildered wonder and apprehension upon the rough-looking persons who had so suddenly appeared, accompanied with so terrible a salute. Ned approached them and said, in reassuring tones:

"Don't be alarmed, ladies, for you are safe now. These men are all your friends."

"Who are you, and they, then? Do you come from my husband, or—"

"No, we are strangers, but seeing you a captive, it was but natural that we should try to effect your deliverance."

The man-hunters had already dispersed, and were examining the dead bodies, and while Arkansaw joined them, Ned turned to reassure the women. He soon gleaned their history, which a few words will comprise.

They belonged to a party of emigrants who were on their way to Oregon, and that evening had been attacked by a band of robbers, who, although finally driven off, had contrived to abduct the two women, Mrs. Hall and her daughter Emma. Although hotly pursued, they had succeeded in either distancing or misleading their pursuers, and had halted where Whistling Dick had found them for the night.

They had a wordy dispute about the captives, but had finally decided to leave it to a game of *monte*, the winner to take his choice. But their brutal plans were suddenly and terribly frustrated, as already detailed.

With native delicacy, Arkansaw Jack proposed to build a sort of hut from pine boughs for the shelter of the mother and daughter, at a spot somewhat removed from the scene of the massacre; and when this work was completed, the dead consigned to the water, and sentinels stationed, the silence of night settled over the little encampment.

CHAPTER II.

CARRIE LEE.

ABOUT mid-afternoon a richly-dressed young man, of probably twenty-seven or eight years of age, was walking through one of the streets "up-town" in San Francisco. He was rather above the mean height, and strikingly handsome, of the brunette type.

His garments were fashionably cut, and of rich materials, but there was a faint shade of flashiness, still further heightened by the rakish manner in which he wore his glossy silk tie, in his appearance. His hands were white and shapely, but were studded a little too thickly with rings to be exactly in good taste, while his shirt-front glittered with a magnificent cluster pin and diamond studs.

He at length paused before a small, unpretending house, and after a moment's hesitation, rung the bell. As the door opened he doffed his hat with a deep bow and smile.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Carrie."

"Why, Mr. Dupuy, I thought you had left the city!" and one would have fancied that the lady was not extremely overjoyed at the sight of her visitor.

"I did intend to have left to-day, but I could not go without calling once more."

"My father is not at home just now, but—" hesitated the lady.

"It is *you* that I wish to see, Miss Carrie, if you will pardon me," and as he bowed again, it was more to conceal his deeply flushed cheek and glittering eye than aught else.

"Excuse my impoliteness, Mr. Dupuy; please walk in," and so saying, the lady led the way into the parlor, followed by her unwelcome visitor.

Motioning him to a seat, Carrie sunk down into the depths of an easy-chair, and awaited his pleasure with a composure that was chilling indeed.

"Miss Lee—Carrie—I had ought to be far from here before now, and I expected I should have been, when I saw you last," at length said the young man, in a deep, mellow voice. "But I could not go without again seeing you."

"Indeed!" was the cold response, and the lady slightly drew erect her form.

"Ah, you did not speak so coldly to me once, Carrie," bitterly added Dupuy.

"Because I thought you were a friend then."

"Mr. Dupuy, I have ever regarded you as a friend and an esteemed acquaintance, and I should be happy to do so still, if you will only permit me. But unless you can accept the answer I gave you at our last interview, I must consider you as a perfect stranger hereafter," firmly replied Carrie, rising from her seat.

"Carrie, take time—do not throw me."

"There is the door; will you leave me, or must I raise the window and call for assistance from strangers?"

"Thank you, I will go. But one word before we part. I know who has supplanted me, and I know where he is now. I shall leave town, but it will only be to visit him, and when next we meet, it will be after *he* is put forever out of the way."

"Even admitting that what you say is true, you would not *dare* to face him; *he is a man!*"

"I would dare more than you imagine, perhaps. I leave you with one sweet thought to console you during my absence—and that is, that your words of to-day have sealed the fate of Edward Payson," and then with a low bow and mocking smile the young man left the apartment and the house.

But this smile left his face when he gained the street, and there was a deadly, repulsive look upon his otherwise handsome countenance.

Dupuy stepped into a saloon where he noticed that a man habited in Mexican garb was eyeing him very closely, and turning to observe him more fully, he fancied that the stranger made a peculiar, though furtive, signal.

Supposing that the man had mistaken him for some other person, Dupuy walked out without paying him any further attention, and resumed his course toward the hotel. But the stranger followed him, and as they entered a comparatively deserted street, overtook the young man, and spoke, in Spanish:

"How goes it, captain? Isn't it rather risky your walking here in broad daylight, and in your own face, too?"

"What do you mean? Who are you?" demanded Dupuy, in a surprised tone.

JNA

"Come, captain, don't make a stranger of an old friend like that; there's no person near enough to hear us."

"An old friend? I don't know you—never saw you before in my life."

"Don't know me—*me*, Luis Guerra! who has known you ever since you turned out?"

"Look here, Senor Don Luis Guerra! as you call yourself, who do you take me for?" angrily demanded Dupuy, turning upon the astonished Mexican.

"Why, yourself, to be sure; who else?" and then advancing closer, he uttered, in a low tone: "You are Joaquin!"

"Indeed! and out of the ten thousand rascals that claim the name, which one may I chance to be?" sneered the young man.

"The Joaquin—there is but one; JOAQUIN MURIETA!"

"Are you crazy, man, or in earnest? I am not the devil, but an American gentleman, as almost any one will tell you."

"Not Joaquin! it is his voice, his form, his face; then if not he, you must be the devil!" exclaimed the astounded Mexican, staring in bewildered amazement at Dupuy.

"Well, don't you bother me again about Joaquin, or you may get yourself into trouble, for if I should but whisper what you told me, you'd never live to make another mistake," and with a short laugh the young man left the crest-fallen Mexican.

His mind was so full of the scene with Carrie Lee, that Dupuy had entirely forgotten the incident before he reached his hotel, but it was to work strange changes in his career, and at no very distant time. It was the germ of a mystery that has never been entirely cleared up to this day.

Reaching his room at the hotel, Dupuy rung for some cigars, and then settled himself down as if for the night. For some time he smoked in silence.

Louis Dupuy was a native of Louisiana, and French, upon his father's side. Nearly two years previous to the date of our story, he came out West to San Francisco, and being possessed of a considerable fortune, left him by his father, had lived a rather fast and dissipated life as a "man about town," and, although it was more than hinted that he, at times, played a prominent part at plucking sundry returned miners, still that was so common an occurrence, and, withal, so fashionable, that his name was clear and unstained.

He made the acquaintance of Miss Carrie Lee in "the usual way," daughter and only child of Archibald Lee, gold-broker, and was soon deeply infatuated with her. She liked him very well, as a friend, and appeared to welcome his visits, as she did many others of her acquaintances.

One evening, just before dusk, some nine months before we first met her, Carrie was returning from down-town, when a couple of intoxicated brutes assaulted her. But she was quickly freed from them by a young man, who then escorted her home, giving his name as Edward Payson.

Her father sought him out, at her request, and it finally ended by his becoming a frequent

visitor at the house. In two months more, Ned had confessed his love, won her consent, and then asked her hand in marriage of Archibald Lee.

The reply was that although he had very little of the filthy lucre, he possessed a willing heart and a strong pair of arms. But those alone would not provide food and lodging for two.

The old gentleman bade him drop the matter for the present, and that whenever he was able to show that he could support a wife comfortably, he might return. The lover sighed and mourned, as usual, for a time, and then Ned declared that he would go to the mines and make his fortune, after which he would return to enjoy the fruits of his industry.

Mr. Lee would consent to no formal engagement, and so they parted. The father was only putting the young man to a test, while he set about confirming the truth or falsity of Payson's story, by writing back to Georgia, intending, if nothing should be proven against him, to recall his prohibition, as he had plenty and to spare, for both himself and the young couple.

Then Louis Dupuy proposed, was rejected, and then, not content with one trial, repeated his offer, as seen. This last interview occurred in the latter part of May, or a little over a month previous to the events detailed in our first chapter.

Louis Dupuy began to utter his thoughts aloud. There was an ugly, set look of vindictive hatred upon his dark features that afforded a very clear index to the nature of his thoughts.

"But he shall never have her—never! if I have to hunt the whole country to put him out of the way!"

"Let me see. I can start to-morrow, or anyhow the day after, and none of my friends need be any the wiser," he chuckled, "But that Mexican—can it be that I am so perfect an image of that fellow Joaquin? If it is so, then I must beware, or I may get into trouble on the road! Hung, or shot for another man! Sounds nice, don't it? Nicer than the reality, anyhow! And he was in earnest, too; no fooling *there*, or he'd never have committed himself.

"Wonder who he is—*what* he is, is easily guessed. Wish I'd thought to have asked him to call on me here; he might be useful. Let's see, his name is—is— Oh, yes, now I've got it—Luis Guerra! I'll put it down before I forget it again," and the name was duly entered in his private memorandum-book.

"Shall I go?—that's the question," he continued, taking a double-eagle from his pocket. "This shall decide it for me. Heads—I go, and then beware, Mr. Edward Payson. Tails—I leave for home instead. Up she goes—and—heads, by all that's holy!" he cried, as he flipped the coin and then examined it.

"Good! that's settled, and I'll start day after to-morrow."

CHAPTER III.

JOAQUIN AT HOME.

THE valley through which ran the Arroyo Cantura presented a picturesque and pleasing scene, upon that day. This truly lovely spot had been for some time past the chosen retreat

of Joaquin Murieta, where he retired whenever his daring deeds had made the country too hot for safety, or when he wished for repose from active life.

The bright, sparkling stream flowed through a valley, upon either side of which towered high the gloomy, rock-crowned mountains, among whose deeper recesses an army might find concealment. The valley was studded here and there by underbrush and small clumps of trees.

But other objects attract the gaze. There are men and women, handsome and lovely, gay and talkative, who recline upon the soft, green sward, in attitudes of carelessness. While, shaded by several towering trees, there stands a cluster of pretty little tents, forming quite a village.

There are horses roaming at will though this modern "valley of ease," and several dogs may be seen. To the trees around hung saddles and bridles, spears and weapons, of the richest description, heavily plated with silver and flakes of virgin gold.

There are two persons, somewhat apart from the remainder, conversing earnestly. One, the man, is lying at full length, with his hand resting upon the other's lap, while her plump, brown fingers caressingly thread his long, black hair.

This man is Joaquin Murieta, the famous and desperate highwayman, a demon incarnate.

The woman who supported the outlaw chief's head was beautiful, of the true Spanish type. Fine and delicate features of an olive tinge, magnificent black hair, but not as silky as it might have been, for the sun had robbed it of its gloss; large, lustrous, liquid-looking eyes; and juicy lips, with even, pearly teeth; a form as lithe and lissom as that of a panther, with hands and feet almost like a child's. Such was Clarissa Vallera, the daughter of an impoverished grandee of Spain, now Joaquin's second wife.

"Joaquin," murmured the girl—for she was not more—tenderly caressing his hair, "you have been gone so long, that I could not help feeling very sad and lonely. It was terrible to be ever thinking and dreaming that I would never again behold you!"

"Lonely! and with so many glad and glee-some ones around you?" and the outlaw chief waved his hand toward the merry groups.

"That but added to my sorrow. Oh, Joaquin, this life is terrible! When will you keep the promise you made me so long ago, and go back to our land, where we can live in peace and happiness?"

"Soon, Clarissa, soon, I hope. But not just yet. I have not enough gold to justify me in doing so now. But you will not have to wait long; one more good strike, and then I will leave my men to shift for themselves, and they shall never know where we have gone."

"I wish it were now, husband, for I cannot help but think that something terrible is about to befall us—you or I—and soon. It is before me in my dreams, and by day, as I awake, I try to banish the fear, and be happy like the rest, but I cannot. Oh, Joaquin, let us go now!"

"It is impossible, Clarissa," replied the chief

somewhat impatiently. "But in one month, or two, then I will go. I promise you."

Their conference was interrupted at this point by the signal of one of the sentinels, who soon after appeared, conducting two men. All eyes were turned curiously upon them, and it was plainly evident that one, at least, was recognized, for the outlaws gathered around, greeting him cordially.

But Clarissa suddenly uttered an exclamation that aroused a fresh interest.

"Holy mother, Joaquin, look at the stranger—he is a perfect picture of yourself, your double!"

"*Carrai!*" cried one, a tall, ferocious-looking outlaw, being no other than the celebrated Three-fingered Jack, or Manuel Garcia, which was his real name. "I did not think the world big enough for two Joaquins to live in at one time, but I was wrong!"

"Who are you?" demanded the outlaw chief, turning to the person whose appearance had elicited these remarks.

"A friend and fellow-countryman," was the reply, in pure accented Spanish.

"Your name—and what is your business here?"

"Luis Cardoza, and I come to join your band."

"Supposing I will not receive you? How do I know but what you are a spy of these cursed Americans?"

"Your friend, Guerra, here, can vouch for me," firmly replied Cardoza, or Louis Dupuy, for he it was in reality.

"It is true, captain," added Guerra, in answer to the glance of the outlaw chief. "We met on the road, and I mistook him for you, but I soon learned my mistake. However, I will answer for his honesty and courage with my own life, if necessary."

"And I present this as my entrance fee," said Dupuy, removing a heavy money-belt from his waist, "to be divided among my future comrades."

This speech was greeted with most vociferous applause, and the outlaws pressed around to greet their new ally. Meantime Joaquin and Clarissa consulted earnestly, and when this ceremony was over, they drew aside with Dupuy to consult more freely.

"Then you really wish to join us?" asked Joaquin.

"For a time, yes."

"And why only for a time?"

"Because I have other— But listen and I will speak freely and this fair lady will plead for me, I know. Well, then, I adore a lady, only less lovely than the one whom I see now, and she loved me also. But I had an enemy, and he whispered false tales in her father's ear, until he gained a promise that she should become his bride. Not that my Carrie consented; no, she loathed and detested him, but her father vowed that she should marry this enemy of mine, and bade her think no more of me."

"This man fled before me and came to the mines, while my angel's father endeavored to have me put out of the way, so as to leave the coast clear for the coward. But I escaped the snares and set off to hunt out my enemy, for if

he is once out of the way, I will have no further trouble in gaining the father's consent, for he is a miserly wretch, and I am rich, although not so wealthy as this other.

"I knew your great hatred of all Americans, and that you love your countrymen. I am one, *he is the other*. So I come to find you and ask your assistance," glibly lied Dupuy.

"Assistance against *one enemy*?" sneered Joaquin.

"Not so; I only mean to assist me in finding him. The rest I will do with my own right hand. And in part payment for this service, all I may chance to make during that time is yours, and when he is once in my power I will beg you to accept, as a little present, a thousand or two of dollars."

"Senor Cardoza," said Clarissa, "I believe you, and think I may promise you my husband's aid."

"Be it so, then; we are friends," and the outlaw chief clasped hands with the renegade American.

"Captain," interrupted Three-fingered Jack, coming up at this point, "Guerra has important news for you."

"Is it so? then tell him to come here. Well!" he added, as the Mexican approached, "what is it?"

"You remember that devil of an American who led the band when all were killed but himself, not far from here?"

"That Arkansaw?"

"Yes. Well, he has gathered another crowd, some forty or so more, and they have sworn never to cease hunting until you are killed. They must be somewhere near here now."

"Good! he shall not escape as easy as he did that time," and the eyes of the outlaw chief glittered ominously.

"But that is not all. Captain Harry Love is on the trail, too, with twenty men, picked from the old company of that dare-devil, Jack Hays, who did us so much damage during the war," added Guerra.

"Are you sure?" asked Joaquin, and there was a shade of anxiety upon his face, for he right well knew the daring and determined character of the man last mentioned.

"I saw them when they started. They are each paid by the Government, one hundred and fifty dollars a month."

"Very well, we know now what to look for. Sevalio, you will take half-a-dozen men and scout around through the hills until you find some traces of this Arkansaw and his men, but take care and not be discovered yourself. Then hasten back with the report at once."

The Mexican addressed quickly selected his men, and rode out of the valley at a rapid pace. And, leaving the rest, we will follow them for a time.

They scoured the surrounding country until the shades of night settled down over the earth, but without success as regarded their mission, and not meeting with any adventure worthy of note. Then they encamped, preferring to eat a cold supper and sleep chilly rather than run the risk of lighting a fire where the blaze might betray their presence to the enemy.

At early dawn they again started, and scout-

ed around through the hills and defiles, the valleys and level stretches of plain, until noon, when they halted and kindled a fire to cook some of their beef. They were in a sort of valley, and two of them kept up a good watch while the remainder ate.

Suddenly one of the sentinels uttered an exclamation, and called the attention of his comrades to something moving upon the hillside not very far distant. They could distinguish the forms of men and horses.

"By the Virgin of Atocha!" exclaimed Sevalio, when they had mounted, ready for instant flight, if necessary, "there's game yonder for us, comrades! I can see the dress of women!"

This fact now became evident to all, as the party observed began to retreat further up the hillside, having apparently just caught sight of the outlaws. They had dismounted and were leading their horses, as the ground was difficult and dangerous for riding.

"That's true, and there are only four in all; two men and two women," cried another. "What shall we do?"

"I, for one, say, let's overhaul them. The captain need never know of it. And we can stay out two or three days," added Sevalio, the leader.

"But they are armed, and may make it hot for us."

"Bah! we are almost two to one, even counting in the women," the other retorted, scornfully. "But if you are afraid, you need not go."

This jeer silenced all opposition, and the outlaws began advancing toward the hill, upon which could still be seen the little party, who had now halted, evidently to note the proceedings of the men below. These latter separated into couples and began advancing up the hills, from three different points at the same time, securing their horses at the base.

CHAPTER IV.

A PERILOUS JOURNEY.

It was after sunrise when the two women awoke, so sound had been the slumber induced by great fatigue, despite the care and anxiety with which their hearts were filled. When they emerged from their snug, leafy retreat, a busy, bustling scene met their gaze.

The man-hunters were attending to their arms and horse equipage, as if in anticipation of a speedy start. When the ladies were observed, Ned and Arkansaw approached them.

"Good-morning, ladies," cheerily cried the Roving Miner. "I trust you slept well?"

"Wasn't pestered with no bugs nor nothin', was ye?" interjected Arkansaw, bobbing his head.

"We slept very well, thank you. But have you seen or heard anything of our friends—my husband?" anxiously added Mrs. Hall.

"Mem," quoth Arkansaw, "any one o' them fellers thet you see around hyar is your husband ef so be you jest say the word; but we hain't seen no strangers."

"They may be along at any moment, Mrs. Hall, but meantime, perhaps you had best eat some breakfast, as you fasted last night. I have kept some steak warm for you."

"We will, gladly; but first, we will feel the better for a good wash. Come, Emma, it will not be the first time that we have used the stream for a wash-bowl, and our hands for sponges," added the mother, with an affectation of gayety.

In a short time they were partaking heartily of the food prepared by Payson and Arkansaw.

"How far were you from here, do you think, when the train was attacked?" asked Ned.

"Not over twenty miles, I am sure, if so much. We came by a very circuitous route, I suppose to elude pursuit."

"Then do you think that you could show the road back now to us?"

"I think I could, for I took close notice of the landmarks, not knowing but what this knowledge might be useful to us," thoughtfully replied Mrs. Hall.

"Your friends must have been misled then, or they would have found you before now."

"I fear so!"

"But that need not concern you much, now, for we will see that you are restored to them safe. Will we not, friend Arkansaw?"

"Ya-as," hesitated that worthy, smoking vigorously. "In course we will, only I wish it had bin one day earlier or later. It's jist this way with me. I've promised solemnly to meet another gang o' fellers what is on the same lay-out as me, at noon this day, some ten or a dozen miles south from hyar. If I ain't thar, then most probably, they'll make a break on thar own hook, an' another squad on us is strong enough to han'le Joaquin ef so be we chaine to fall in with him, an' we're liable to do that at any moment now."

"Well, Arkansaw, I'll tell you," slowly rejoined Ned. "There is not likely to be much danger in rejoining these ladies' friends, and I will try it alone, or, if you will, let one of your men come with us. He can easily meet you afterward, if he wishes to do so."

"You kin hev him, or two, or half a dozen, fer thet matter, an' I only wish it was so I could go along. But you see how I am fixed," eagerly exclaimed the leader of the man-hunters.

"I think that one will be plenty, if the ladies can trust us."

"Anything, so that we can rejoin our friends once more. But I am sorry to trouble you so greatly," added Mrs. Hall.

"On the contrary, it is a pleasure. Besides I am a rambler anyhow, and it matters but little which direction I take. I can easily find my partners afterward. We were out prospecting and I became separated from them by some mistake."

"Wal, Ned, ef you only want one man, take your ch'ice. I know that a'most any of them 'll jump at the chaine o' doin' a sarvice to the wimmin critters," said Arkansaw.

"Well, then, ask that one they call 'Pet Pete' to step this way. I choose him."

"An' you couldn't 'a' did better ef you'd tried a week! He's a gentleman an' a scholar, ef not a good jedge o' whisky, an' kin whip his weight in I don't keer what!" warmly cried Arkansaw.

The man indicated was notified of the project, and gladly consented to accompany them.

He was handsome, of polished and gentlemanly address, quiet and somewhat reserved, but with a cool, self-reliant demeanor that told he was a man to be trusted in almost any emergency.

There were plenty of spare horses, thanks to the victory of the preceding night, and a couple of these were equipped for the ladies as completely as possible, although there were none but men's saddles. With one for Payson, also, the little party were in readiness for the journey.

Arkansaw drew near, and in a somewhat embarrassed tone, said:

"Hope you won't take no 'fense, ladies, but the boys want to come an' shake hands an' say good-by. 'Tain't of'en 'et they get to see a white woman out hyar, an' it sorter kerries 'em back home ag'in to tha'r own folks."

The request was gladly granted, and with many a heartfelt wish for their welfare and safety, the two parties separated, the man-hunters gazing after the quartette until the last one had disappeared around an abrupt turn in the valley.

For a time the little party rode along in silence, feeling some affected by the leave-taking. They followed the plain trail left upon the moist earth, and then, when it became lost upon a stony tract, Mrs. Hall directed them. Then came a sudden interruption, that at one time bade fair to end fatally.

They were journeying through a narrow defile, on either hand of which the rocky cliffs towered high and almost perpendicularly. Turning an abrupt curve, Payson halted abruptly and uttered an exclamation of alarm, while his horse shied violently, casting its unprepared rider from the saddle.

"Back—back!" cried Ned, drawing his revolver. "For God's sake, Pete, lead the ladies back out of the pass! It is a grizzly bear!"

"Turn and ride back to the open, quick—we will keep him back until you are safe," hastily directed Pet Pete, and then urged his snorting horse up alongside of Ned. "Jump up here, man, and we will run for it," he added, but it was now too late.

The huge monster appeared at the turn, and rose erect, growling fiercely, and displaying his gleaming white fangs, while the muscular fore-paws sawed the air, revealing the long yellow claws, of a finger's length. The two women could not control their horses, and then, with the loose one of Ned, they became jammed together in the narrow passage, thus rendering a conflict inevitable.

One glance convinced the men of this, and they prepared their weapons. But they had only revolvers and knives, and what could these avail against the almost invulnerable monster.

For one moment the antagonists stood confronting each other. The adventurers did not wish to make the first demonstration, hoping faintly that the brute might retreat without attacking them. But the horse snorted wildly, and then Bruin dropped upon all-fours and slowly advanced, appearing to think that he only had to feast at leisure.

"Look out for yourself, Ned," shouted Pete, and then their revolvers cracked loudly and continuously.

The bear paused as if bewildered, but then the stinging pain of his wounds wrought his fury to the highest pitch, and he rushed forward with a horrible roar.

Payson adroitly avoided his blind assault, by leaping aside, and fired twice, so closely that the hair of the animal's side was singed, and he staggered; but only for a moment. Then there came a horrible shriek of mortal agony, and terror, followed by a heavy fall and confused scuffle.

The Roving Miner thinking only of the danger of his friend, rushed madly into the cloud of smoke and dust and fired his last charge with the muzzle of his pistol touching the left side of the grizzly monster. Then he drew his other weapon. As he fired again, another report sounded just before him. With a savage howl, the beast sunk down, and with a convulsive quiver, died.

"Pete, Pete, are you dead?" cried Ned, anxiously.

"No, nor hurt much," came the welcome reply, and as the cloud arose he saw Peter half-erect, resting upon one hand, while the other still clasped the pistol that had fired the fatal shot.

The bear, infuriated by his wounds, had rushed upon the horse and bore it to the ground, killing it outright, while the rider was fastened by one leg to the ground. Then he had fired, the bullet piercing the bear's brain, through an eye.

Quickly releasing his comrade, Ned thought of the women, but they were gone. Leaving the scene of the struggle, the two men soon found their companions, who had finally mastered their horses and were anxiously awaiting the result, the other horse having fled madly as soon as extricated from the jam. Heartfelt and sincere were their rejoicings over the almost miraculous escape, although two of their number were now dismounted.

"Well, it comes in good time, anyhow!" laughed Payson, "for now we will not need to dine upon cold victuals."

"But will it be prudent to build a fire?" anxiously queried Mrs. Hall. "You know what Mr. Arkansaw said about Joaquin."

"I don't believe he is near here, and besides, it may be the means of our meeting with your friends. If they notice the smoke they will come to it, hoping to find your abductors."

Acting upon this reasoning, a fire was quickly kindled and in a short time steaks from the grizzly monster that had caused them so much trouble were sputtering before the coals. There was no water near, but enough remained in their canteens to suffice; and while partaking heartily of the rude though wholesome cookery, the two men prepared a quantity of the meat to take with them, in case of an emergency, although they sincerely trusted that they would not be so situated as to need it.

Then their journey was renewed, and Mrs. Hall was soon compelled to admit that she had lost all remembrance of the route they should take. And unfortunately both of the men were comparatively new to the country, and her description of the place where the wagon-train had been left, was useless.

"Never mind, we will keep straight ahead; we must come out somewhere, sometime," laughed Ned Payson, but he was far from being as fully at ease as he wished the women to believe.

He knew that the foot-hills were infested with predatory bodies of Indians, and no less savage white-skinned outlaws, and if they chanced to fall into the power of either, their doom was easily divined. Their only hope was in finding some trace of the emigrant-party, or stumbling upon some wandering miner, who might be able to set them aright.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Pet Pete—whose name, by the by, we have omitted to state was Peter Finley—who was in advance, "we are blocked in this direction, at any rate. The valley runs out, and is ended by that high cliff."

"Then we must climb one of these hills; it would be too great a loss of time to turn back now."

The women dismounted, and then the ascent was begun, the men leading the horses, and by proceeding in a winding course around the hill, they soon caught sight of another valley, and closely scrutinized it, but without discovering aught.

"Now that we are so far up, let's go clear to the summit," said Payson, "and take a good view. We may see friends."

After they had advanced some little distance, Peter glanced behind and below them, exclaiming in a dubious tone:

"There are some horsemen down there, Ned, sure as you live."

"What—where?"

"Close behind that clump of trees. It must have hidden them from us before. What do you think—are they friends, or—"

"What do *you* say, Mrs. Hall; do you think they are your husband's party?"

"I don't—No! I am sure not, for I know there was not a single white horse in our company, and there are two," she exclaimed, after a moment's scrutiny.

"And I can make out their dress now," added Finley, slowly. "There is too much glitter and ornaments upon them for honest folks—that is, for any unless Mexicans. I fear we're in a bad box, Ned."

"Not unless there are more of them concealed yonder. They are only seven, and if really Mexicans, I hold myself good for six."

"Well, then, I guess I can manage the other one," laughed Peter. "But look, there is a good spot for a stand, if I mistake not, on the hill-top. It looks like a regular fort."

"We will try it anyhow, as, if they mean mischief, we must meet them, for they could ride all around us as it is. Come on, Peter; help Miss Emma," and once more the little party renewed the ascent.

The designated spot was quickly gained, and to their delight they found that it was so arranged, that the two men with their revolvers could hold at bay a far stronger force than that which threatened them now. A few bowlders were rolled to strengthen the weaker points, and them all eyes were directed toward the enemy, for that such the new-comers were, they had no doubt.

The Mexicans—for it was Sevalio and his men—had secured their horses at the foot of the hill, and were now advancing from three directions, so as to in a manner surround the crest of the hill. They paused as if for consultation, when they beheld the fugitives watching their movements, and then Sevalio advanced closer, waving his sombrero upon the muzzle of a pistol.

"Halloo, strangers!" he called out, in indifferent English, when just without pistol-shot.

"Halloo, yourself, and see how you like it," retorted Ned, standing upon the rocky breastwork. "What do you want?"

"We are friends, and we want to join you."

"Are you sure? Well, then, you may come up, but it must be alone. Tell your men to stand back, if they value their lives."

"You would not shoot a friend?"

"Not if we know they are such. But you are a Mexican, and no miner; then what do you do out here?"

"I might ask you that; who are *you*?" retorted Sevalio.

"Miners, and honest men."

"And the women, are they honest miners also?"

"Don't be saucy. If you want to come up and see us, you may, alone. If you are honest yourself there is no danger."

"You won't let my men come with me?"

"No."

"Then we will without your permission. But give us up the women and you may go free yourself."

"Bah! we are men, not Mexicans!" and Ned stepped down from his perch just in time to escape a pistol-bullet, fired by one of the outlaws who had approached within range unseen, under cover of the parley.

But Finley had marked the spot, and as Sevalio ordered a charge, and the outlaw exposed himself, a bullet met him and stopped his career of crime forever. The others only uttered a yell of rage at the fate of their comrade, and advanced rapidly, although at the same time keeping their persons well-screened behind the numerous boulders with which the hillside was strewn.

Twice the defenders fired, but without success, as the outlaws were cunning and well-skilled in this sort of warfare. And they were gradually drawing nearer, having spread around so as to completely encircle the little fort, thus requiring the defenders to be doubly active and vigilant.

A ball slightly tore Finley's cheek as he endeavored to get a shot at his man, but the revolver of the miner took ample revenge, and the second death was chronicled by a shrill yell of agony, answered by a shout from the assailants, and then a general rush was made. Now the reports became quick and frequent, but owing to the excitement, very little damage was done.

Slight wounds were given and received upon either side, although none were disabled; and then, as if discouraged, the outlaws sunk down and concealed themselves behind such cover as they could find, evidently in the hope of picking off the miners without any great damage to themselves, or else to await the fall of night.

Suddenly Mrs. Hall approached the Roving Miner, and said in a low and anxious tone:

"Look down yonder—near where we first saw these demons—there are horsemen and I cannot make them out, but it seems as though they were not friendly."

Following the direction indicated, Ned saw that what she said was true, and called Pet Pete to his side, bidding him look carefully, as his eyes were the keenest. It was a body of horsemen, numbering about a score, who were rapidly approaching, having no doubt been attracted by the report of fire-arms.

"Ned, we're trapped now, for certain," said Finley in a low, serious voice. "These are Indians!"

"Are you sure?—it is so far you may be mistaken," urged Ned.

"No; I wish I were, but my eyes are good for twice that distance. They are Indians, and although there is a chance that they are friendly, yet it is ninety-nine to one that they are not."

"Then we must not stay here. Let the ladies mount and we may escape them by flight over the other side."

"You forget the Mexicans, Ned; they would have a word to say about that. No, we must face it out here, for on foot we would stand no show of escape, and might be corraled in a far worse place."

"Then let the women go and we will cover their retreat. They can escape, at any rate."

"At *your* expense?—never!" firmly cried Emma.

"My daughter is right, friends," said Mrs. Hall. "It was for us that you got into this danger, and we will never leave you to meet it alone."

"But, madam, you can do no good here; if we must fall it would only be two more lives lost, and besides, your presence would only serve to embarrass us," expostulated Ned.

"No, it is useless, my dear friend. We would only be lost in the mountains, alone, and have to meet a far more fearful death—by starvation. You mean kindly, and we thank you from the bottom of our hearts, but we will stay with you till the last," earnestly added the mother.

"Hark!" cried Pet Pete, as a loud cry of dismay met their ears. "The Mexicans have just found it out, and the trappers are trapped!"

They cautiously peered over the breastworks and beheld the terrified outlaws rushing at headlong speed down the hillside toward the enemy. But it was only in the desperate hope of gaining their horses in time to flee from the sudden and unexpected danger, for they had no intention of resistance.

They reached their animals and mounted, but as they turned to flee, a volley was fired by the red-skins that emptied all but two saddles, and while a number hotly pursued the survivors, the main body halted at the foot of the hill to plunder the dead.

"Where are you going, Pete?" demanded Ned, as his comrade stepped over the barricade upon that side furthest from the enemy.

"That fellow I shot has a good brace of revolvers and they may come handy. They don't know how many we are, and if the women will shoot

once in a while, it may fool them," hurriedly explained Finley, and then in a few moments more he had succeeded in his object and returned with a fresh lot of ammunition.

One of the brace of pistols was given to either of the women, who declared their readiness to do what was required of them, and as both of the miners possessed a pair, their armory amounted to thirty-six shots, without reloading. But still, they knew that did the Indians make a determined rush, they must be speedily overpowered.

"What do you think, Pete; do they know we're up here?"

"They know that *some one* is here, and it won't be long before they find out just who."

"Then we stand a poor show, for they must number two-score, since the last ones came up."

"All of that, but we're not gone yet. You see, an Indian is not a white man, and won't fight like one, either, unless he is cornered; then he goes in for all that is out. Now, we can make them believe that we number at least half a dozen, and if we can pick off one or two, why they'll fall back to consult. Then they'll wait for night, hoping to take us unawares. You see that it is clouding up."

"Then even if it be as you say, we have but a few hours more, at the best. It can end in but one way," gloomily responded Ned.

"Hush, man, don't let them hear you," continued Finley, indicating the two women by a slight gesture. "They feel it enough now, and we must encourage them a little, or they'll break down, and then we're gone sure enough. I tell you that we will fool them yet, and those clouds are just the very thing we need."

"How so? If they hide us, so will they the Indians, and then a sudden rush and we are—what?"

"As soon as it gets dark we will leave the horses and try to pass through their lines. Then we can easily hide ourselves until they have abandoned the search. We have food enough, thanks to the bear, to last several days, and before that time we will be safe."

"Safe or—dead!"

"Just so, but I prefer my view of the matter," quietly replied Pet Pete.

Their attention now became fixed upon their new enemy, who had as yet given no indication of having suspected the presence of the little party upon the hill, at least so far as the latter could see. The main body were gathered around the bodies of the dead outlaws, and the captured horses, while those who had departed in pursuit of Sevalio and his comrades, were now out of sight.

Then Emma Hall uttered a half-stifled cry and glided to the side of the miners, touching Payson upon the arm.

"There is an Indian almost up to us over here—I caught a glimpse of him as he darted from one rock to another!"

"Where—quick, show me! He mustn't be allowed a glimpse at our number inside here."

"Look! he is behind that black rock—the loose one," whispered the maiden, indicating the covert.

Ned now beheld the shaven crest of a savage slowly project from behind the boulder,

and from his position, aiming through a sort of loop-hole, the young miner fired his weapon with a cool and deliberate aim. Like an echo there came the shrill, horrible death-yell that, like a wild beast, an Indian invariable utters when mortally stricken, and the spy bounded high from his covert and fell to the ground, shot through the brain.

His comrades pealed forth their war-cry and darted up the hill, eager to avenge their brother's death. Hastily requesting Emma to watch through the loop-hole, where she would be in comparative safety, and upon the first sign of an enemy in that direction to notify him, Ned rushed to assist Finley, whose pistol was already speaking.

The two men fired rapidly with both hands, as soon as the enemy were within range, and with such good effect, although constantly changing their position so as to apparently multiply their number, that the Indians, after discharging one harmless volley, retreated in dismay, bearing with them their dead and disabled, evidently thinking that the three marksmen—for Mrs. Hall nobly performed her part—were treble the number.

"Good!" exclaimed Finley. "It couldn't be better, and now they'll be more cautious. They did not expect this or they'd have surrounded us. Now they'll wait until dark, when it will be easy to approach us, without being seen."

"I should call that *bad*, instead of good," anxiously remarked Mrs. Hall.

In reply Pet Pete quickly detailed his plan, and then when the pistols were all reloaded, they began their preparations for the venture as soon as it became dark enough. That it would be so, and at an early hour, the intensely black and heavy masses of clouds plainly evidenced. One of the furious mountain storms was brewing, but just now it was hailed with genuine delight, instead of the usual alarm.

The heavy boots of the miners were muffled by being wrapped in pieces of cloth, so that the nails might not betray them to the keen ears of the enemy when the trail was made. Then they waited and waited with anxious hearts until Finley said it would be dangerous to delay the attempt any longer.

The women were directed to follow close after the two men, and in case of any collision, they were to flee down the hill and do the best they could, trusting in Providence to direct their footsteps to a place of safety. Then they crossed the breastworks and began the perilous descent.

Their course had been laid before dark, and unless they should stumble upon some of the enemy, Finley felt confident that he could gain the low valley beyond in safety. He was slightly in advance; then came Payson and the two women, last, almost touching each other.

Pet Pete was slowly groping along in the intense darkness, when suddenly his left hand came in contact with the warm, smooth skin of a human being, who uttered a low grunt of surprise. As if by instinct the sinewy hands of the miner grasped the other's throat and bore him backward to the ground before he had time to cry aloud.

In the fall the head of the savage came in

contact with a jagged piece of rock, thus rendering him senseless. Then the knife did its work, and then all was over, almost ere the other fugitives comprehended what had occurred.

"Follow me—it's all right now," whispered Finley, arising and touching Ned.

Feeling confident that the line of the enemy had been passed, the fugitives proceeded more rapidly, knowing how precious every moment gained now was, and were speedily nearing the foot of the hill when the guide suddenly uttered a low cry as his foot stumbled and he fell.

Then came a sliding noise and a heavy fall, followed by a muffled groan. Payson felt for his comrade, but he was gone! had disappeared as effectually as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up!

CHAPTER V.

ARKANSAW MEETS HIS MATCH.

ARKANSAW allowed the two women, guarded and guided by Ned and Pet Pete, to depart upon the journey that was destined to be so perilous and eventful, with visible reluctance, and every eye followed them until they had disappeared with a mute salute. Then he said in a loud, rough tone, assumed to hide his real emotion.

"Quit your gawpin', thar, you fellers! Didn't you ever see a female critter afore? Come on; we must ride like a house afire, or we'll miss the boys after all," and as he spoke he mounted his horse and dashed rapidly ahead.

"Say, Arkansaw," called out one of the men, riding alongside, "be you goin' to take dinner with Joaquin?"

"Look hyar, Hoosier Tom, none o' your tricks on travelers; besides, I ain't in jest the best o' humors, an' ef my fist tuck you a swipe, you'd go to sleep for a month. So don't rub me the wrong way o' the fur," growled the leader of the man-hunters.

"Now, don't git your back up about nothin', boss, for I don't usually shoot off my mouth without sayin' somethin'."

"No more you don't, Hoosier, and I take it all back. What did you say anyhow? Them dratted wimmen critters hev mixed up my brain-pan so that I won't be able to think clear for a month."

"Nothin', only you know it's pritty sart'in thet our game is in this neighborhood, an' as you know, they're no fools. The way you was goin' they'd hear us a mile off, an' hev plenty o' time to hide or ambush us."

"You're right, Tom. I think I'm gittin' to be a borned fool; but we'll fix that now. You know the road—will you go ahead as a sort o' lookout?"

"Yes, gladly," was the prompt reply.

"Then, Turkey Egg, you'll go the left, at about half a mile away, an' Slippery Jeems 'll take t'other side. Ef you see anything suspicious smell it out ef you kin, but don't git into trouble. Ef it's 'portant, j'ine us instanter ef you ain't seen; but ef you are, give them the best you've got, an' hold out till we come. Don't fire, onless it's to save your life, for we'll follow the sound, an' we hain't got no time to lose unnecessarily. D'y' understand?"

The three scouts selected signified their approval, and without more words set off upon their mission, while the main body slowly advanced upon the direct route to the rendezvous. And without any event of particular importance the man-hunters joined their comrades at about an hour after noon, their united band thus numbering forty, save one, all daring, determined men, who had vowed never to cease hunting until they had found Joaquin, and exterminated his band of ravagers.

Upon consultation with the leader of the other band, Arkansaw, now elected chief by a unanimous vote, learned enough to satisfy himself that their game was somewhere near Lake Mono, about fifty miles to the southeast of their present position. And as soon as their horses had rested, and they themselves had taken a bite, the man-hunters mounted and set off at a rapid pace toward this point, sending their scouts slightly ahead, as before.

That night when they halted they had traversed over one-half of the distance, and morning came without any adventure. Hoosier Tom and Old Rye took the advance position when they again started.

They had passed probably half a dozen miles when the two scouts came out in sight of half a dozen horsemen, who apparently observed them at the same moment, for they both halted and keenly scrutinized the other, although at nearly a mile distance. The scouts held their ground, but did not advance, awaiting the approach of their comrades.

When the head of the party appeared, the strangers set spurs to their horses, and dashed swiftly away, while the man-hunters set off in hot pursuit. Both parties were well mounted, the fugitives if anything the best, and for some miles they kept in occasional view of each other, although Arkansaw's party were slowly being distanced.

The Americans were well assured that the strangers were members of Murieta's gang, and even after they had vanished from sight, pressed eagerly onward, hoping to come upon the outlaw band before they had time to flee, or to ambush themselves in a secure position. The thought that their game was so near them, for which they had hunted so long and endured so much, fired the pursuers to madness, and they dashed recklessly forward, taking no precautions whatever against being led into an ambush.

Leaving them for the moment we will return to the outlaw band at the valley of the Arroyo Cantura. Soon after the departure of Sevalio's scouts, Joaquin had sent out another band, being none other than the half-dozen men we have seen pursued by Arkansaw.

Late on the night succeeding his disastrous attack upon the two miners and their charges, Sevalio returned to the rendezvous with one man only, and he badly wounded. During their ride this precious scoundrel had concocted a plausible story to account for his disobeying the chief's orders, for he knew that did he avow the real truth, Joaquin's anger would know no bounds, in which case, the only answer

he himself would receive, most probably would arrive in the shape of a pistol-ball.

"How is it that you come back alone, or with only one man, when you left with six, Sevalio?" asked the chief, his eyes glittering.

"It was all my fault, captain; but I hope you will hear my story first, before you judge. You see, we didn't find any traces the first day, but this morning we saw a mule train, and followed it until they halted at noon. Then I crept up, and managed to get near enough to hear their talk.

"They were laden with gold, partially of miners from Shasta, and somehow had become separated from their guard. They were only eight men in all, and those we were good for, so I thought we could do no better than rake in the stakes for ourselves.

"We rifled the packs, and started for home with our fifteen pounds' weight to each man, a nice little pile. But as luck would have it, we run into the guard, some twenty in number, each with three or four pistols, a rifle, and knives as big as a *machete*.

"They fired, and two of us fell. We fired, and five of their number dropped. Then they chased us, and picked off one by one, until only I and Valenzuela were left, and we only managed to give them the slip by dropping our treasure, when Valenzuela was wounded. They did not chase us any further, or we would not be here now," concluded Sevalio, furtively eying the chieftain, whose brow was dark and gloomy.

"Well, seeing that you were working for the interests of the band, I will let your disobedience pass, but it is fortunate for you, my man, as I had made up my mind to serve you the same as I did Floresco for going against my orders."

"But won't you send out men for the train?"

"No. If it is as you say, they have reached Mariposa before this, and it would be useless. Besides, we must not divide our force now."

The next day—destined to prove an eventful one—dawned, and the second band of scouts had not yet returned, and the outlaws felt completely at ease, though Joaquin had ordered them all to remain at the camp until Antonio returned with his report. All at ease excepting Louis Dupuy.

The women were seated on the green sward, when suddenly a loud, crashing noise was heard among the bushes, and a huge bear broke from the covert and sprung half-way across the lawn. Dupuy saw that it was a full-grown grizzly, and seeing it glare at Clarissa in a bloodthirsty manner, he uttered a loud cry of alarm, and drawing his pistol, sprung boldly between the beast and its anticipated prey.

The brute half-turned, and then as if surprised at the sudden appearance of an armed foe, arose upon his hams and began pawing the air clumsily with his arms. Dupuy shouted again for help, and then fired twice at the bear's exposed throat.

He heard the beast's fierce howl of rage and pain, and saw it plunge forward through the cloud of smoke. Nimbly avoiding its rush, he fired again. Quickly turning, the brute knocked the leveled weapon from Dupuy's hand, the force causing the young man to slip and fall.

Seeing his danger as the bear fell upon all-

fours almost directly over his body, Dupuy rolled swiftly over twice, at the same time drawing his knife. But he could not have arisen in time to have saved himself had he been alone, and as it was, one of the enormous paws was raised to deal the death-blow, when a score of shots were fired, and the bear rolled over on his side without a groan, killed by the outlaws who had been alarmed by the cries and the shots, arriving just in the nick of time.

"Are you wounded, Senor Cardoza; are you hurt?" cried Clarissa, rushing forward and kneeling beside the man who had so bravely risked his life in defense of hers.

"No, not at all, lady," he returned, and as he strove to arise, their faces came in contact, though by no means violently, and the magnificent masses of her hair effectually concealed this fact from the spectators; but her cheek was flushed and her great eyes glowed with a bright light as she arose.

"What means all this, Clarissa?" asked Joaquin, agitatedly, coming up at this juncture.

"You see—this bear attacked us, and Senor Cardoza came to the rescue. Thank him, Joaquin, for had he not been a brave man, you would have no Clarissa now!"

"I do thank you, sir, and you are my friend—my brother now," warmly said the outlaw chief, clasping Dupuy's hand. "And if I can serve you, even with my life, it is at your will. Anything you ask, it shall be yours. I can deny nothing to the one who saved my wife."

"Then do not mention this again," rejoined Dupuy, brushing the sand from his garments. "I did nothing more than any man would have done, and there was no danger."

"I see that you are truly brave, Senor Cardoza," said Clarissa, pressing his hand, "and I will not thank you in words. But the time will come—and I pray it may speedily—when I can express my gratitude in deeds. I could deny you nothing, now."

"Whew!" whistled Three-fingered Jack, as the party slowly dispersed, "wonder how Joaquin likes *that*? If I were he I would keep a close watch upon this admirable Senor Cardoza, and for that matter, upon *her*, as well!"

But the excitement attendant upon this adventure was destined to be speedily eclipsed by one far more thrilling and momentous. It was scarcely noon when the shrill whistle of one of the sentinels rung down through the valley, and was quickly followed by its author, who rushed at headlong speed up the pass, accompanied by Antonio and two men.

"Well, what is it?—quick!" exclaimed Joaquin, as they approached.

"The enemy—that Yankee, Arkansaw, is coming!" gasped the Mexican, reeling from the saddle of his foam-covered horse, rather than dismounting.

"What—where—how far?"

"Not more than two miles—they are on my track."

"Where are the rest of your men?"

"Dead! we were hard pressed, and had to ride along the precipices. At the 'Devil's Gulch'—you know we had to leap it. We three cleared it—the others—they lie at the bottom!"

"How many are they—do you know?"

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"About forty or fifty—not more."

"And we are seventy; it is enough!" cried Murieta, and his eyes glittered with the fire of a deadly joy. "Sevalio," he continued, hastily, "take thirty or forty of the men and station them among the rocks commanding the right side of the pass. Be careful and keep well concealed. When I fire from the left, take good aim and do not let one of these fools escape to tell the tale! Cardoza, you come with me."

In one minute's time the bandits had reached their respective positions, and not a man was to be seen. The women had retreated back among the trees of the valley.

The only way by which horsemen could gain the encampment was by a narrow pass or defile, commanded upon both sides by the towering cliffs, among whose crevices were now concealed the outlaw band. From there, they would hold any foe completely at their mercy, who might enter the trap.

We left the man-hunters chasing the little band of scouts, under Antonio. Finding themselves hard pressed, the fugitives left the valley and took to the hills, hoping thus to elude their pursuers, by their superior knowledge of the country.

But in this they were mistaken. There were those upon their track as desperate as they, and equally as much at home in the saddle. And thus, along the hillside, along the verge of precipices where a misstep or a single tremor would lead to a frightful death, the chase swept.

In their haste the outlaws had taken the wrong turn, and suddenly found themselves confronted by the "Devil's Gulch." A crevice of fifteen feet divided them from the opposite side, which was considerably higher than the one upon which they were now, while the abyss yawned far below them, where the gray rocks reared their jagged crests as if yearning for the libation of blood that was about to be shed upon them.

There was only the alternative of certain death if they turned back, while this was a chance for life, and the fugitives did not falter. They rushed their affrighted animals to the leap.

The foremost one stumbled and struck the verge, and then fell down—down to death! One fearful shriek and then a dull, far distant thud!

Still the others pressed on. They could hear the click of steel-shod hoofs behind them. Only three made the leap in safety.

The pursuers came in sight just as the last one made the leap, and undaunted, followed Arkansaw's lead across the abyss. What mortal man dared, they would not shrink from imitating. When the last man was across they swept on after the outlaws.

Their number was four less, but what of that? Their blood was up, and they would wait to mourn over the sad fate of their comrades when they had more time.

When they had time! Ah, that time was fated never to come!

In half an hour more they could see the faint smoke curling up from the deserted camp-ground of the outlaws. Their prey was at hand, and without thought of the fate they were rushing blindly upon, the man-hunters dashed along the narrow defile. All they thought of now was that their hated enemy—

he for whom they had sought so long and dared so much—Joaquin, was close at hand.

They neared the inner mouth of the defile, and could see the little cluster of trees and the riderless horses, but where were the foe? Ah, where were they? The answer came full soon.

Suddenly the miners paused. A dark form rose up among the rocks, and a clear voice shouted out:

"Fire, men—fire!" and his tones were blended with a single shot.

Then came a tremendous, deadly, withering volley from both sides of the pass, that shook the hills to their very foundation, as it seemed. Full thirty of the man-hunters fell dead or dying from their saddles.

The hat of their leader, Arkansaw, was riddled with a dozen balls, and blown from his head; still he was unhurt, although his horse was killed. He glared around him with a howl like that of a famished tiger.

"Up the rocks—at 'em, boys. It's our only chance!" and he set the example, clearing himself from the dead and dying, and drawing himself up by his powerful arms.

The survivors, undaunted at the fearful slaughter, imitated Arkansaw's example; but those that climbed the highest had the furthest to fall. Again the voice of the chief rung out, and again did the walls of the narrow pass shake with the combined report of three-score revolvers.

Arkansaw and one other alone clung to the rocks. The rest of his men were killed, but he did not know that, nor did he pause to see if he was followed, but yelled out:

"Follow me, boys! Up—up the rocks—hands and teeth! It's the only chance—close in, boys!"

"Cardoza!" hastily said Murieta to Dupuy, "you see these two men? Take the smaller one prisoner, but do not kill him as yet."

As he spoke the outlaw chief leaped with a true aim from his covert, alighting with fearful force full upon the bent back of Arkansaw, dashing him senseless to the ground. Dupuy quickly followed his example, and Whistling Dick was laid alongside his commander.

Several of the outlaws obeyed Joaquin's order to take the prisoners to the huts, and there, after securely binding them, to keep good guard over them, nor to allow any person to approach without his orders. He knew how intensely Three-fingered Jack hated Arkansaw, and that he would be raging like a demon for his heart's blood did he know that his old antagonist was alive and in their power.

This demon was, perhaps, the most blood-thirsty that ever disgraced the shape of man. He murdered from the mere love of blood, and when enraged, if permitted to work his will, would hack his victim into fragments. It is calculated that during his three years in California he slaughtered over eight hundred persons with his own hand.

He, then, and Sevalio were ranging the field of the massacre for valuables.

"Curse the luck!" growled Garcia; "he is not here!"

"Who?" asked Sevalio.

"The leader—that Arkansaw; the man who escaped me before, you know."

"I do not see him."

"If he escapes me now, I'll sell out cheap! But he sha'n't. I'll hunt a year but what I'll find him!" snarled Three-fingered Jack.

"Whom do you mean, Senor Garcia?" asked Antonio, approaching.

"That Arkansaw."

"The captain has him up at the camp."

"What! dead?"

"No, alive, and he has sent me for you."

Garcia rushed at headlong speed toward the spot where he saw Murieta awaiting him, and, brandishing his weapon with horrible glee as he felt that his long-deferred revenge was close at hand.

"Where is he, captain—where is he? Quick."

"Where is who?"

"The prisoner."

"I have two, but you mean Arkansaw. Well, I have got a job for you to do; one that will just suit you. It is to fight a duel with Whistling Jack."

"I'll do it—with both, if you'll let me!"

"No, I wish to keep the leader for a day or so, for I believe that he has got a secret that will be valuable to me."

The bruised and bleeding forms of Arkansaw and Whistling Dick were brought forth from the tent and cast rudely upon the green sward. They had recovered their consciousness, and now glared defiantly around upon the scowling faces of the outlaws.

"Do you know me?" snarled Garcia, bending low down and slapping the cheek of Arkansaw.

"Bah! you one-eyed ape, if a body'd see'd you once, an' the sight didn't turn his senses, he c'u'd never take you for anybody or anythin' else. An' thar's my mark, too!"

The deep scar upon Garcia's flushed face showed ghastly white at this taunt, and had he not been restrained by those near him, the American would have died upon the spot.

"Back, Garcia! back, I tell you!" shouted Joaquin, as Three-fingered Jack crouched for a leap.

"But he may escape us again, captain," and he shook his long dagger viciously.

"No—I say no!" thundered Joaquin. "I mean to keep him for a few days, but you may work your will with the other."

"I'm Whistlin' Dick, an' kin— Ah!"

The duel was fought. The unfortunate man uttered a deep, gasping groan, and Whistling Dick was beyond pain.

"Guerra, do you guard Arkansaw, and shoot down any one who attempts to injure him. I will be your security," and then turning to Dupuy who stood near at hand, he added: "Come with me, Senor Cardoza; I wish to speak with you."

CHAPTER VI.

THE TREASURE CAVE.

PET PETE had disappeared as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

Ned groped cautiously around, but did not find any traces of his companion. Just then came a bright and protracted flash of lightning that revealed surrounding objects with almost

the distinctness of noonday, and the young miner shrunk back with a shudder. Just before him, at his very feet, lay a dark, cavernous opening in the hillside.

Then all was darkness, all the more intense from contrast. At this moment there came a long-drawn, quavering yell, that reverberated with a thousand echoes among the rocky hills, and caused the three fugitives to shudder with apprehension, fearing that they had been discovered by the momentary flash.

But Ned quickly divined that such was not the case, but that the body of the savage slain by Pete had been found. Still he knew that the crisis was close at hand, for, fired with revenge, and to solve the mystery of their comrade's death as well, the savages would not hesitate long before trying to surprise the supposed inmates of the little fort.

When their escape was discovered, there would be little difficulty in divining which direction they had taken, and this, too, would solve the cause of the sentinel's death. Then would come the pursuit, and—

Just at this portion of his thoughts, Ned thought he heard the sound of Finley's voice calling to him from almost directly beneath his feet. He listened eagerly, and it came again, this time unmistakably in tones of their missing friend.

"Payson—Ned, are you there?"

"Yes, what is it? are you hurt?—quick!" the Roving Miner replied, bending over the opening in the hillside.

"No, only a little shaken and a good deal frightened," said Pete, this time seeming to be nearer the surface. "But come in. This place is the safest now, until those devils have abandoned the search."

"But how can we get down?"

"I slid down like I used to on the cellar-door at home, but it is rather rough, and goes against the grain, so you had best try to walk down."

"Hark!"

From the little fort upon the hillside there now arose a series of terrible yells of wondering rage, that but too plainly told their own tale. The fact of their escape had been discovered by the Indians.

"Quick! there is no time to lose now! They will be down all around here in a moment. Pass the women to me, Ned," hurriedly exclaimed Pet Pete.

"But is it—" faltered Emma.

"Yes, safe; but haste—for your life, hasten!"

The renewed yells from the highland above silenced all scruples, and the two women were hastily thrust into the crevice, and followed by Payson. Then Finley advanced first, leading Emma, and Ned followed, guiding the mother down the steep, but uneven plane, to what seemed the bottom of the cave.

"You must wait here, ladies, while we go back to the entrance, so if there are any of the Indians who know of this retreat, we may be able to hold them at bay. Keep perfectly still, and I do not think there is anything to fear. Come, Ned!"

The two miners quickly reached the entrance and crouched down upon either side, with their weapons drawn for instant use. They could

hear the savages approaching, evidently in great wonder and rage at the strange disappearance of their anticipated prey, stumbling against the rocks and boulders in the darkness, now and then setting one in motion that thundered swiftly down the steep hillside.

Suddenly there came an awful shock to the young miners that nearly deprived them of their senses, and covered them from head to foot with gravel and dust. *One of the boulders set in motion by the Indians had fallen upon the entrance of the cave, and the fugitives were walled in!*

After their first stupor had passed, the two adventurers felt that this accident was a most providential one, at which they should rejoice, rather than otherwise, for as they extended their hands, they could tell that the entrance was completely closed, save a few small cracks that would serve to admit the fresh, cool air. This would effectually baffle a search by the Indians, if their suspicions should be aroused as to the real cause of their enemies' disappearance.

But then a horrible fear assailed them at the same moment. What if the boulder was too heavy for them to remove, when they desired to emerge? The sides of the entrance were of solid rock, and as they braced their shoulders against the boulder they could not move it an atom!

In whispers they decided not to inform their companions of this new danger, and as soon as it was deemed safe, they would explore their retreat and endeavor to find another mode of egress. Then they descended and rejoined the women, who were sitting clasped in each other's arms, in an agony of apprehension.

"Have they gone?" whispered Mrs. Hall.

"I trust so, but it will not be safe for us to venture forth before day at any rate, and perhaps not then, for the savages will range around here until satisfied that we have really escaped them. They will not abandon the search while the faintest hope remains of avenging the death of their fellows."

"But what will become of us? And my poor husband!" sobbed the older woman striving in vain to suppress her tears.

"We have enough food, thanks to the foresight of Ned here in bringing along the bear's meat, to last us a week with economy, and I'm sure I hear the noise of a running spring close at hand. And your friends will not give up the search until you are found. You should know that," reasoned Finley.

"I do know it, but I cannot command my feelings."

"And no wonder," added Ned, compassionately, "you have passed through trials enough of late to break down any spirit, however strong. Do not try to check them, for it will do no harm and you will feel all the better for a good cry."

After some time the weary and exhausted women fell asleep in each other's arms, and, at Finley's request, Ned also sought repose. The floor was covered with a fine dry sand that felt warm and comfortable to their jaded frames, and then all was silence save the faint, far-off roar of the storm without, that was now raging with terrific fury.

From hearing this rumbling noise, Pet Pete surmised that the cave must be near the surface of the hillside, or else with lofty ceiling. Then, feeling a consciousness of safety, and with a vague sensation of pleasure that their vindictive enemies were exposed to the fury of the warring elements, Finley gradually sunk into a doze that the subdued murmuring of the storm without soon lulled into a deep sleep.

This lasted for some hours, and when they awoke it was broad day, as could be told from the faint rays of light streaming through the crevices around the blocked-up entrance. Finley cautiously stole up the dimly-lighted "stairway" and applied his eye to one of the cracks.

But he suddenly shrunk back, for he had seen the stalwart, half-nude form of an Indian at only a few feet distance, apparently staring him full in the eye. The hastily-drawn weapon was thrust back into his belt, however, for he saw his mistake.

Although he could plainly distinguish things without, Finley knew that it would be impossible for the savage to do likewise, owing to the gloom within. And then he heard a low, guttural voice speaking just above his head. There was an Indian sitting upon the very boulder that covered the cave entrance!

The accident that he and Payson had so deeply regretted was thus the means of preserving their freedom, if not their very lives. The heavy rain had washed the debris from the rock, as well as obliterated all traces of their footprints, so that unless accident should reveal their retreat, the fugitives were safe, at least from their red-skinned foes.

But would they ever escape from their living grave? Finley shuddered at the thought as he noiselessly stole down the rocks and rejoined his companions in misfortune. He quickly told them of the discovery and regretted his ignorance of the Indian dialect, as otherwise he could doubtless have gained some important information regarding the plans of their enemies.

"Come," he added, in a cautious whisper, "let's go and see what we can learn concerning the secrets of our home. We can find something to make torches I dare say, and anything is better than remaining here."

Following his cautious lead, the prisoners crept away from the vicinity of the entrance, and advanced deeper into the shadows, collecting such sticks and fragments of wood as they stumbled against. Rounding a corner that completely shut off a view of their starting-place, the little party paused while Peter tied a small bundle of the punk-like wood together to form a torch.

"Make haste, Pete," said Payson, laughing, somewhat nervously, "I am anxious to proceed. Who knows but what we may find a gold-mine?"

"Many a true word is spoken in jest, Ned," excitedly added Pete, who had ignited a lucifer-match. "See this!" and he held up a small piece of quartz that shone and glittered in the dull red glare.

"Gold! by all that's good!" cried Ned, in a tone louder than was prudent, snatching at the fragment, and thus putting out the light.

"Luckily I have a good supply of matches, Ned, or I should have to tie your hands. And for that matter, your tongue also, unless you are a little more prudent. We must not speak above a whisper here, for there is no knowing what may happen. The roof appears thin, and the Indians are all about us."

"You're right, Pete, as you always are, and I will be more wary, but the sight of this completely drove all such thoughts out of my head. Do you know that I really believe we are in a vast gold-mine?"

"It looks like it, I must say," replied Finley, holding the blazing torch aloft and gazing eagerly upon the roofs and sides of the cave, which flashed back the light with a thousand scintillations.

And even the sands beneath their feet were thickly impregnated with flakes of the precious metal, forming the richest kind of "pay-dirt." As the little party slowly proceeded, their delight and wonder increased until they could with difficulty restrain their ebullitions of joy. Around and above them they saw sufficient of the auriferous deposit to enrich an entire community.

But then as they reflected upon the dangers that still environed them, their joy was somewhat clouded. Of what use all this wealth in their present position? It would not procure them a mouthful of food or a drop of cold water, or lead them to safety.

They proceeded slowly along and found that there were numerous smaller galleries branching off from the main one in which they stood, and at each of these divisions they left some plain trace, so that they might not become bewildered upon their return, and thus take the wrong passage. To their excited imaginations it seemed as though they had traversed miles, and that the mine, as it really appeared to be, was a gigantic labyrinth in whose meshes one might wander for ages if the clew to the entrance was lost.

Suddenly Emma uttered a half-suppressed shriek, and sunk back shudderingly, covering her eyes with both hands as if to shut out some fearful sight.

"What is it, Emma, child?" asked her mother.

"Oh, look—look!" and she indicated a remote nook, where the rays of the torch but faintly penetrated, with her hand.

They glanced in that direction, and the shudder that the sight of death almost invariably brings, crept over the forms of all. For there, propped up by the glistening wall in a sitting posture, was the gleaming white skeleton of a human being!

Its grinning frontlet was turned full toward them, and it seemed as though there was a diabolical sneer upon the ghastly visage as if anticipating the time when they would be like unto it. The hair still adhered to its skull, and had partially fallen over the face.

"Stay you with the women, Ned, while I go and examine it. We may find something that will tell who the poor devil was," muttered Finley, advancing toward the remains with the gleaming torch held high above his head.

Close beside it lay a spade and a broken pick,

with a bottomless pan. A rusty knife and revolver appeared to have fallen from the moldered belt, and lay beside the skeleton.

In one of its fleshless hands was a discolored tin or copper box, of an oblong shape, and so firmly clasped by the gristly fingers, that ere he could loosen it, Finley was forced to break one of the bones. He could not repress a shudder, but still persisted, for he knew not but that by this box some light would be shed upon the sad fate of the unknown.

Then he retreated to where stood his pale companions. He motioned for them to follow, and quickly led the way back out of sight of the skeleton, and then exhibited the box.

"Will you open it?"

"Of course; it is our duty, for we may by its means learn who the poor fellow was, and how he came here, all alone. It may tell who his family was, and if so, we can send them news of how he met his fate," solemnly replied Finley.

The box resisted all the efforts to open it for some time, but then with the aid of a knife the corroded cover pried off, and the quartette uttered a faint cry. A stained and soiled paper lay uppermost, upon which were traced rude letters, in what appeared to be blood.

Removing this, Finley lifted up a morocco case, evidently a miniature, and upon touching the spring the case opened, and a face was revealed. The face of one who was evidently young, and of more than common beauty; the face of a woman smiling with an arch look of tenderness that caused a still deeper sensation of sadness to fall upon their spirits.

Beneath this again were two soiled and well-worn letters, the direction of which was illegible. Opening them, they were written in a delicate running hand, beginning with, "*My dear husband,*" and signed *Coralie*, but without date or address.

Finley then unfolded the strange manuscript, and slowly read as follows:

"My name is John Allison, and my home is in Springfield, Ills. I accidentally shot myself, last night, and I am dying. This may never be discovered, but something bids me write it that I cannot resist. I came to California in '49—the fall of last year—to better my fortune. I left a young wife to whom I had not been married a year, but we were poor, and thought it was for the best. I lost my companions in the mountains, and being followed by Indians, took refuge in this cave. I saw that there was countless wealth upon every hand, and I determined to remain here, little thinking that it was destined to become my tomb. I have collected over *two hundred and fifty pounds' weight of gold*, which is concealed at the entrance of the third passage to the right of where I now lie. I pray whoever may find this paper to seek out and give one-half of this gold to my wife, Coralie Allison, keeping the remainder for their trouble. As you hope for peace hereafter, do not defraud the widow of her right! I will place this in a box, with her letters and picture, and pray God that it may be found by some honest man.

"JOHN ALLISON."

This was the strange message from the dead, and then the paper was refolded and almost reverentially restored to its position in the faithful tin box. Then Payson spoke.

"Let us solemnly swear that if we live, to

perform this duty, if the wife is still alive!" and they one and all took the oath.

They then, as if eager to divert their minds from the sad reflections caused by the incident, set about the task of finding the buried treasure. They paused before the gallery, counting third from the right hand of the dead man, but could see no traces of the deposit.

"This must be the place, but I can see no signs of it," said Finley.

"Remember the lapse of time since then. Over two years at any rate. We must hunt for it," added the Roving Miner.

Then they began removing the soft, dry sand from before the entrance, with their knives and hands. For some time they searched in vain, then Mrs. Hall uttered a low exclamation.

She had laid bare one end of a skin bag, that had resisted decay, with the hair side out. Under the nimble fingers of the men, twelve long, heavy bags were quickly unearthed, and the strings that secured them untied, revealing the glittering dust and scales of gold.

At a rough computation there was about seventy thousand dollars' worth of the yellow metal before them. And one owner of this was dead—was the other still living?

Almost unconsciously this reflection shot through the minds of all, but it was quickly banished with a feeling almost of dread. Then they glanced at each other, inquiringly.

"What had we best do with this?" at length asked Finley.

"We do not know what fate may befall us at any moment; or even if we may ever escape from this cavern alive," said Payson. "And besides, we cannot be incumbered with it, for we may have to flee for our own lives. It will be safe here, as it has for so long a time; then let us bury it again, marking the spot so that we will not forget it. When we are once safe, we can return for it."

"I believe you are right, Ned, and we will do it. If we live, we will return for it, for we can easily make our fortunes here, even without this, although it does not matter much to me," and there was a sad cadence to his tone as he spoke.

"It does to me!" cried Payson, exultantly. "For here I see the means of life-long happiness—love—everything! With what one month's labor here will bring me, I can return and claim the hand of my darling—of my promised bride!"

"And I—I am alone! There is no one for me to love or to love me—except myself," gloomily added Finley.

Emma glanced timidly at her mother, and half-unconsciously drew closer to the young man. He observed the movement and glanced keenly up into her face. The maiden trembled, her cheek flushed hotly, and she drew back; but neither spoke, although there came an instantaneous change in the demeanor of the young miner.

The treasure was once more restored to its resting-place, and the sand carefully smoothed over, so as to leave no trace of its removal, after which the four friends sat down close together and conversed in low tones upon the past, the present, and the future, allowing the torch to

die out. They felt no inclination to pursue their explorations further, at least, just then, and there they remained for hours.

By some legerdemain, best known to themselves, the little band of Emma Hall soon found itself tightly clasped within the strong, hardened one of Pet Pete, and the understanding was as complete between them as though it had been expressed in words. They had known each other but a very short time, but it seemed as though each hour composed a year, so eventful had been their acquaintance.

CHAPTER VII.

THREE-FINGERED JACK IS SATISFIED.

THE conversation between Joaquin, Clarissa and Dupuy, *alias* Cardoza, was of long duration and evidently of importance, judging from the earnestness with which it was conducted. And when they returned once more to the camp, it was night.

The slaughtered bodies had been removed, and all traces of the horrible massacre obliterated, and no one would have suspected from the demeanor of the outlaws that such an event had transpired so lately. The only difference was that they were more than usually boisterous and merry, while the liquor passed rapidly around.

The outlaw chief and Dupuy joined in the carousal, and among the entire community, there was but one clouded face to be seen, if we except the prisoner, Arkansaw.

That face belonged to Three-fingered Jack, who sat with a deep scowl upon his hideous features. Naturally ugly, the loss of one eye, and the broad scar across his face, added to the ravages of dissipation and excesses, rendered him absolutely demoniacal.

The undaunted Arkansaw, who had feigned sleep so well as to deceive his guard, who then joined the orgies, is awake and desperately striving for liberty. His hands and feet, nay, his entire body, is swathed in tightly-drawn cords of rawhide, and it seems a useless endeavor on the prisoner's part.

Still he persists. Being a very large-boned man, his wrists were nearly as large as his compressed hands, and he had strained until the hard rawhide was soaked with blood from his lacerated flesh. And it began to gradually give way before the powerful strain.

The intense pain caused him to grit his teeth fiercely, but he did not desist for a moment. He knew if he remained a captive that his doom was inevitably sealed, for he had proved by far too dangerous an enemy to Joaquin for the outlaw chief to allow him to be at large. He only wondered that he had not been killed ere this.

His plans, in case of escape, were all arranged. He would secure himself a horse and weapons, and place the former in readiness for instant flight. Then he would return.

Arkansaw resolved not to miss this opportunity of putting the Scourge of the Mines out of the way, if only out of revenge for the murder of his comrades. He would kill the chief, and then with his head for proof of his exploit, would make the best of his way to the settlements. He had seen Joaquin and Clarissa retire

to their tent among the trees, where it was standing alone and secluded.

Then his hand slipped from the noose, and it was with the utmost difficulty that he repressed the shout of exultation that arose to his lips. After this beginning the remainder was comparatively easy, and one by one the coils were loosened, and in another half-hour his limbs were entirely freed.

Then Arkansaw arose and stretched his herculean frame to its full height. But it was growing late and there was no time to be lost. So he glided along through the shadows toward where he could hear the horses browsing, securing a bridle from one of the trees.

He felt so secure that he did not once glance behind him, and even had he done so, Arkansaw would have suspected nothing, for the dark form that dogged his footsteps seemed to partake of the serpent's nature, so silent, stealthy and unobtrusive was its progress. But it was none other than Manuel Garcia, Three-fingered Jack!

This worthy had firmly resolved to have revenge upon that man who had so well-nigh defeated him at his own game—knife-play—some time previously, and who had given him the ghastly-looking wound upon his face, that had not as yet entirely healed. He knew how fearful was Joaquin's rage when crossed or disobeyed, but all this he resolved to dare. He felt that to kill this hated enemy he would almost be satisfied to die himself.

He had taken up a position near the prisoner within the gloom, and was only awaiting a favorable opportunity to strike. This he thought had arrived when the last one of the revelers fell asleep, and he slowly advanced with a drawn knife—the deadly weapon that had ended scores of lives.

But then he paused. He saw the struggles of Arkansaw, and divined that he was about to escape. With the same feeling that induces a cat to toy with the captured mouse, Garcia resolved to await the result of Arkansaw's trials, and then, did he succeed in freeing himself, to strike the fatal blow just when he was beginning to taste the sweets of regained freedom.

Arkansaw finally succeeded in securing a horse, and bridling it without noise, led it up to where the saddle hung against a tree, appropriating this to his own use, also. Then, with the ominous shadow still following him, he led the animal down the valley to the entrance to the pass, taking a circuitous course so as to avoid rousing any of the sleepers.

Here Garcia drew himself up in readiness to spring upon his foe, but a low chuckle and muttered sentence caused him to sink back behind a rock. Arkansaw had uttered aloud his resolve concerning Joaquin Murieta.

For a moment Jack hesitated, as if in doubt whether or no to allow this project to be carried out. By its means he would stand a fair show of succeeding the dead chief, for he was popular among his comrades, being both feared and respected.

As the unsuspecting borderer brushed past him, Three-fingered Jack sprung up and buried his long knife to the hilt between Arkansaw's shoulders.

Arkansaw fell back, dead, without a groan.

The sun had some time risen before the outlaw camp was astir, and as yet the disappearance of the prisoner had not been noted. All remembrance of him seemed obliterated by the debauch of the preceding night, and only when Joaquin approached and spoke, did they marvel at his disappearance.

"Antonio, bring the American here, I wish to question him."

The outlaw addressed at once proceeded toward the spot where the prisoner had been left, but he was no longer there. Uttering a cry of wonder, Antonio stooped and picked up the blood-stained thong that had bound Arkansaw, still knotted and intact.

"What is the matter, man, and why don't you do as I bid you?" impatiently added the leader.

"He must have escaped, captain."

"What! escaped?"

"Yes; here are the cords that bound him, still whole. He must have dropped them over his hands," said Antonio.

"Bring them here. Who was it that I gave the charge of the prisoner to last night?"

"It was I, captain," tremblingly cried Luis Guerra, advancing slowly.

"Where is the prisoner, then?"

"I know not. He seemed to sleep sound, and I was tired and thirsty, so I—"

"So you got drunk and neglected your duties, disobeying my orders. Do you know what the penalty of *that* is?" coldly returned the outlaw chief, drawing his revolver and slowly cocking it, while the delinquent shuddered at each ominous click.

"Pardon, senor—mercy, for the love of God!" pleaded the outlaw, sinking upon his knees before the stern chief.

"You know the laws of the band—if we allow one to break them unpunished, there would be an end to all order, and we should be ruined," and the weapon was slowly leveled, while the hard, pitiless eye of the outlaw chief glanced along the dark tube.

"Hold, captain!" cried Three-fingered Jack, springing between the two men. "Wait until you hear me before you shoot this cowardly devil, and you may have a more worthy mark for your bullet."

"What do you mean?"

"I killed the stranger. You would not let me do it in the daylight, so I was forced to keep all the fun to myself, and I assure you 'twas glorious."

"Why did you not speak before?"

"Because I had made up my mind to let you think he had escaped, until I saw that you meant to shoot this poor devil for what I had done myself," boldly returned Garcia.

"I ordered you not to touch him."

"I know you did," was the cool reply.

"And you disobeyed me?"

"It really seems so."

"You know what the laws of the band say?"

"Yes; that if one acts as I have done they are to be punished by death."

"I have pardoned you more than once, Jack; and more than I would have for any one of the rest, because you are a valuable friend and true

comrade. But this is too much. A line must be drawn somewhere, and—do you understand me?"

"Bah! have you changed so greatly, captain, that you can't speak out your mind? Do you think I am afraid? See! here is a good mark—shoot!" defiantly cried Garcia, tearing open his embroidered shirt and baring his breast, boldly facing Joaquin.

His ready revolver slowly rose to a level with the heart of the delinquent, and then paused, motionless as a rock. The outlaws stood around, in breathless silence, awaiting the end; but Garcia did not flinch or waver in the least.

He gazed firmly and calmly into the eyes of his chief. Then a low murmur ran around the assembly, and as if in obedience to it, the weapon was lowered and uncocked.

"No, Jack, you are too brave a man to lose, and I pardon you," cried Joaquin, and a series of wild, exultant yells arose from the outlaws that told how gladly the decision was received.

"I thank you, Joaquin, and now I will tell you the whole truth," said Jack, warmly clasping the extended hand. "This Arkansaw made his escape himself, last night, and secured him a horse and weapons. I followed him, for I saw it all. I was about to strike him, when I heard him mutter to himself, 'Now for Joaquin; he shall not escape me this time!' He intended to kill you and then escape. But I killed him as he turned toward your tent."

"Why did you not tell me so before, Jack, and have spared me this struggle?" asked Joaquin, agitatedly.

"Because it would have seemed as though I was asking for mercy, and I beg a favor of no man."

"You are wrong, Garcia; but I will not soon forget this service. And you, Guerra, let this be a lesson to you not to again allow your appetite to override your duty. But have any of you seen Clarissa, this morning?"

A general reply in the negative was given.

"She was not beside me, when I awoke, but I suppose she has gone to the *arroyo* with some of the others. Sevalio, see if you can find her; I wish to speak to her at once."

The outlaw chief strode rapidly to and fro upon the smooth turf, as if uneasy in his mind, while a strange light burned in his eyes and a dark shadow rested upon his handsome face. Was it a premonition of the blow about to fall upon him?

After a considerable time Sevalio returned with an uneasy look, and stood before Joaquin.

"Well?"

"I cannot find her, captain, and—"

"And what? why don't you speak out, man?"

"Pardon me, captain, but I was about to say that none of the women have seen the mistress, and—and the stranger, Senor Cardoza, is also missing."

"What! can it be— Bah! I'm dreaming! She would never leave— Go, and set all the men at work; hunt every portion of the valley, and do not return until you have found some trace of them," and then he strode swiftly off to where stood the little white tent.

Entering this, almost the first thing that his eyes rested upon was a small slip of paper pinned upon the wall. Snatching this away, he opened

it, and scanned the contents at a glance. It contained the following words:

"JOAQUIN MURIETA:—

"When you find this note I will be far from here with the choice of my heart. It will be useless for you to follow me, for I would die a thousand deaths before I would return to you. I don't love you, and I do love *him*. Adios. CLARISSA."

He did not speak, but crushing the paper in his nervous hand, rushed from the tent. Here he met Antonio, who said, in a constrained tone:

"Captain, they are nowhere to be found, but your horse and that of the mistress are no longer with the rest—"

"She is mistress no longer, for she has fled with that traitor Cardoza! But go, get the men ready for a ride, and saddle me a horse."

"Do you intend to follow them?" persisted Antonio.

"Yes, if it be to the ends of the earth. I will have revenge upon them both if it takes a lifetime."

In another half-hour all was in readiness for a start. The men were in the saddle, and the outlaw chief separated them into half a dozen parties, directing each in which direction to ride, and then added:

"Men, you all know how I have been betrayed—I will give a thousand dollars to the man who brings me their heads!"

"Do you mean that of the lady Clarissa also, captain?" asked Three-fingered Jack.

"Yes, her more than the other!" and then the outlaw chief dashed down the valley at full speed, followed by the men he had selected for his own command.

CHAPTER VIII.

NED AS A SCOUT.

THE four prisoners—for such they were in reality—sat in almost happy quietness for hours. It seemed as though the message from the dead, that they had so strangely received, had exercised a calming influence upon them, rendering all averse to further exertions. Then after partaking of a frugal meal, they once more sought repose in slumber.

They had decided that upon the morrow it would be comparatively safe for them to venture forth, and had already laid their plans. One of the men was to try and find the body of the emigrants, while the other three remained at the cave, as the women would be only a hindrance upon such a scout.

At first waking they again started to complete their explorations, and see if there was no other mode of exit than that which they had entered. With a plentiful supply of water they advanced along the main passage.

But this came to an abrupt termination in a deep pit or abyss, far down in the depths of which could be heard the sullen roaring of water, so greatly below their level that when Finley held his torch over the verge, naught could be observed save a sort of steam arising from the troubled waters. They drew back with a shudder of horror and dread.

"There is no chance in this direction, at any rate," observed Finley.

"Let us try this side passage, then. Look at

this hand—it points in that direction," said Payson, indicating a rudely-hewn hand upon the rocky wall.

They entered the passage, that was barely high enough to allow their walking erect, and so narrow that only two could proceed abreast. This gradually became still more contracted, until Ned paused with the women, while Pet Pete crept along upon his hands and knees to explore as far as he dared on to the ending.

In a short time he returned, and the glad, triumphant look upon his face proclaimed his success even before his lips did. He had found the road to freedom!

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I saw daylight beyond, and crawled along until I could see out. It emerges in the bottom of a valley, and as far as I could tell, the coast is clear."

"How late is it?"

"Not much after sunrise, so you will have a good start. By which way will you return? It is difficult passing this way."

"By the other, then—so you can be near there. But, unless you hear me signal, or call you by name, don't show yourself. There is no knowing who or how many are aware of the cave's existence. But I will not be gone long; that is, longer than I can help."

"God bless you, Mr. Payson, and protect you from all harm!" fervently said Mrs. Hall. "Ask for Charles Hall."

"All right," and then with the hand-clasps of his friends still warm upon his fingers, the young miner departed upon his mission.

They all knew right well that it was one fraught with danger, and that he might never return, but such thoughts they strove to dispel whenever they obtruded, not, however, with complete success. Leaving them for the present, we will follow Ned upon his scout.

He found that the mouth of the narrow tunnel was choked up with vines and undergrowth, and after he emerged, these were carefully replaced as naturally as possible, and then with one long, searching gaze around him, Ned started down the valley. He only proceeded for a short distance in this direction, and then began to ascend the hill, hoping from its summit either to discover the emigrants or his own friends, from whom he had become separated, and who he knew would beat around the neighborhood while there remained a hope of finding him.

Ned fully realized the danger of his undertaking, and exercised the utmost caution, for although all seemed peaceful and deserted around him, he had but too lately proved that there were more inhabitants among the hill-haunts than consisted with perfect safety. Thus, slowly proceeding, keeping shielded by such cover as would answer his purpose, and frequently pausing to scrutinize the hills and valley, the young miner finally gained the top of the hill.

Lying flat upon the ground, he swept his eyes around without seeing the object of his search. Then he carefully drank in every detail of the surrounding country, so far as his position allowed.

Arranging the course he was to pursue, Ned

began the descent upon the opposite side of the hill, using the same precautions as before.

The valley was quickly reached, and for some time Ned hastened along with a dull, heavy feeling of anxiety resting upon his heart. Somehow he could not banish the fancy that the mission upon which he was bound was destined to end fatally; the thought would return, despite his resolutions to the contrary.

He entered a narrow and deep pass from the valley, and had proceeded nearly half a mile, when a suspicious sound caused him to pause and listen intently. He was not mistaken; he could distinguish the faint, far-off clink of steel upon the flinty rocks, and knew that a body of horsemen were approaching.

A gleam of pleasure lit up his face as he fancied that they might prove to be those for whom he was searching, but then he resolved to run no unnecessary risks, and glanced keenly around for a hiding-place. He left the bottom of the defile and clambered up the rocks, that here arose like a series of gigantic steps, and concealed himself among the crags, but in such a position as would afford him a fair view of those passing below.

If they should prove to be emigrants, then there would be no harm done, and if upon the other hand they were enemies, he could lie there until they had disappeared. Then the head of the party rode in sight.

Payson gave a quick, convulsive start and half arose, as the face of the leader became visible, but then he sunk down again, muttering lowly to himself. His first impulse of hailing the party was checked by one glance of their habiliments.

He saw that they were dressed in Mexican garb, even to the leader. And to make his suspicions doubly strong, Ned recognized the features of Sevalho as those of the man who had led the attack against him and his companions.

"What is he doing here, and leading such a gang?" muttered Ned, peering curiously after them as they rode by.

He felt assured that in the leader he had recognized the one-time suitor of Carrie Lee, Louis Dupuy. It was the outlaw chief leading the search for the fugitives, Clarissa and her lover.

In his eagerness Payson had arisen erect, to gaze after the outlaws, when he was suddenly made aware of the folly he had been guilty of. One of the rearmost robbers abruptly turned around and beheld Ned's bright-red shirt against the somber rocks, and then called out eagerly:

"Joaquin! there is a spy among the rocks yonder!"

As Ned heard these words, knowing enough of Spanish to understand their import, he turned and began scaling the rocks with marvelous celerity, for he knew that his liberty, perhaps his life, was at stake.

"After him, men—after! Do not let him escape—he may have news of importance!" ordered the outlaw chief, excitedly.

A half-dozen men threw themselves from the saddle and dashed toward the spot easiest of ascent among the rocks. Only pausing to fire a hasty volley, they continued the pursuit,

Although more than one of the leaden missiles whistled unpleasantly close to his ears, Ned did not pause either in obedience to the hint thus conveyed, nor to return the compliment. He knew full well that he could not disable all his pursuers, and even did he contrive to lessen their number by one or two, it would only exasperate the remainder the more, and render his capture equivalent to death.

Glancing over his shoulder, Ned saw that most of the horsemen were riding rapidly off, evidently with the intention of skirting the hill, and thus intercepting him as he descended. Then he gained the summit, while the nearest of the horsemen had not yet reached the half-way point.

Rendered desperate, Ned took a quick but accurate aim at the foremost outlaw, and then without pausing to ascertain the result, he crossed the ridge and ran swiftly along the side of the hill, with the wild cry of agony ringing in his ears. He saw that a short distance ahead of his present course there was an abrupt descent of a few rods, and then beyond this the hill rose to its former level.

Trusting that the outlaws would think he had continued his flight by the easiest course—down the hill—Ned strained every nerve to round the corner before they gained the summit, and thus discovered his ruse. Just as he darted around the curve, the foremost of the outlaws appeared upon the ridge, and with a loud shout dashed headlong down the slope, perhaps fancying that he beheld the fugitive among the huge boulders that studded the hillside, or else feeling confident that such would be his course.

Ned heard the cry, and believing he had been discovered, slackened his pace and half-turned with drawn pistols, in the desperation lent by despair; but then knowing that if such indeed was the case, it would be certain death to remain, he once more resumed his headlong flight. His clear brain and steady nerve, aided by great agility, now saved him from certain destruction, for he was under such headway that to stumble or make a misstep would be fatal.

As he reached a turn in the pass an exclamation broke from his lips, for just before him were the forms of half a dozen horsemen, and Payson thought he was surrounded. But a second glance showed him the real state of affairs, and he nimbly dodged back.

The outlaws were the same as he had at first seen, who had remained behind to hold the horses of those who had followed him up the hill. He had become bewildered and taken the wrong turn.

Mentally cursing his stupidity, Ned retraced his footsteps in a sort of dog-trot, intent only upon putting the greatest possible distance between himself and his foes. He did not consider it prudent to keep in the defile, as it now afforded but little hope of eluding any enemy, were any such before him; and he really began to believe that every rock and bush concealed one.

But the walls now towered high above him upon either hand, almost perpendicularly, so that a cat could scarcely have scaled them. And so, accepting the inevitable, though not

with the best of grace, the young miner proceeded rapidly upon his way.

He discovered, presently, that the pass came to an end, opening into a pleasant valley through which he could catch an occasional glimpse of a stream of water running amid green trees and bright flowers. His arduous exertions had produced a violent thirst, and a glad cry broke from his parched throat as he quickened his pace to a run.

But fate seemed against him then, as before, and he paused at the mouth of the pass with a bitter curse. Before him and in full view Ned could distinguish the forms of men, women and horses. And the sight of these, with the little cluster of gleaming white tents and curls of smoke, told the young miner that he had stumbled upon a camp of the outlaws, perhaps the headquarters of Joaquin Murieta himself.

Ned drew back and scanned the cliffs upon either hand. They seemed difficult of ascent, but still they could be scaled. It was the same point where the outlaws had ambushed and exterminated the band of man-hunters under lead of Arkansaw, though he little dreamed of that then.

Drawing a long breath, the Roving Miner boldly began the ascent of the cliff, although being careful to screen his movements from the inhabitants of the valley as much as possible, for he felt little inclined for another race such as the one he had so lately taken part in. As he proceeded, Ned fixed the spot as completely in his memory as possible, inwardly vowing to lead Arkansaw to it when next they met.

After considerable labor he gained the ridge of the hill and sunk down against a rock panting and breathless, and gazed with anxious curiosity in every direction. Down in the valley behind him he could see the outlaws and a number of women, moving to and fro, in apparent peace and security.

Upon one hand he could just discern a body of horsemen, apparently receding, and fancied that they were those who had come so well-nigh to capturing him. Then again, almost directly before him at the end of a long, level valley, he could distinguish a second troop, and jumped to the conclusion that they were the men of whom he was in quest.

This feeling grew stronger every moment, and at length, as his limbs were somewhat rested, Ned arose and once more started upon his mission. He thought that fortune had sported with him enough, and that surely he would now be allowed to proceed without further delay or difficulties, but he soon learned that such was not to be the case.

He had descended perhaps one-third of the hill when as he wound around a huge boulder, he almost ran against a man who was coming from the opposite direction.

He was a Mexican and heavily armed, and most likely belonged to the party encamped over the ridge. Perhaps even then he was gaining a spot whence he could dispatch the death-shot, and this idea probably quickened Ned's motions.

Giving a noiseless leap, he darted around the corner where the stranger had passed, with pistol half-raised, ready for an instant shot. Then

a queer game of cross-purposes was set in motion that would have caused an uninterested observer to smile audibly.

First came the Mexican, with knife and pistol ready for use, stealthily gliding in a crouching posture around the huge boulder upon one side, while almost directly opposite was the form of the Roving Miner, engaged in precisely the same tactics. Thus they each made one circuit of the rock without seeing the other.

Then, as if by one impulse, they turned and stole silently around upon their own tracks. In this manner a second circuit was made without either catching a glimpse of the other, and fancying that their foe had escaped by flight, they left the rock and began keenly scrutinizing the hillside, above and below, slowly moving about.

Suddenly Ned paused, and his pistol-hand quickly rose to a level. He had caught sight of the Mexican, whose back was turned toward him. It seemed almost like murder, and Payson hesitated, but only for a moment.

The gleaming weapons in his antagonist's hands showed what was the fate in store for him if discovered, and that it was either his life or the other. So the trigger was touched, and the ill-fated man fell forward without a groan, motionless in death.

With a half-suppressed shudder Ned hurriedly passed by his victim, and rapidly descended the hill toward the body of horsemen, whom he could now see quite plainly, and who had evidently heard the pistol-shot. Feeling confident that if not the men for whom he was searching, they were at least friends, Payson boldly advanced to within speaking distance of the troop.

"Who are you, my man?" asked the foremost, a tall, handsome man of middle age, although dressed roughly, and with sadly-begrimed hands and face; a common complaint, by the way, with the entire party, Ned included.

"A friend, I trust, and if I mistake not, one that you will be glad to see—that is, if any one of you answers to the name of Charles Hall."

"That is my name!" eagerly cried the tall leader. "What do you mean?"

"That I have been hunting you since early day. Your wife and daughter wish you to call upon them, if you can spare the time," laughed Ned, his usual spirits fully restored by the success of his enterprise.

"Where are they? Quick! And what do you know about them? For God's sake, man, don't keep me in suspense!" almost gasped Hall.

"They are safe and well, and at no very great distance from here, and I will lead you to them if one of you will lend me a horse for a few minutes. I've had a rough time of it to-day, and am nearly played out."

"Here—take mine," and Hall sprung from his saddle and almost lifted Ned into it. "Now lead on, and you can explain it all to us as we go."

And then as they proceeded, Ned gave a hasty outline of the events of the past few days, not omitting to mention the essential service performed by the two women, although he suppressed all mention of the treasure that the hill retreat contained for the present. He was a little perplexed upon that point, for twenty odd

men might make short work with what would amply enrich two—and then the dead man's treasure.

It was nearly night when they reached the hill within whose bosom was concealed the gold-mine, for unfortunately Ned had to pursue a roundabout course, from having become a little confused by the windings he had been forced to take since leaving the cave. Then, leaving several men to guard the horses, Ned led the way up the hillside toward where he supposed the entrance to be.

For some time they searched for the boulder that had blocked up the aperture, without success, and then one of the men called out that he had almost stumbled into a hole. Rushing to the spot, the Roving Miner found that the entrance had really been discovered, but it was now open and unobstructed!

How had it become thus? Surely Finley had not been able to remove the heavy boulder that had resisted their united strength, and besides, he would not have done so, even had he been able.

Suddenly they started in alarm and gazed at each other with pale faces. From the depths below them came a strange sound. A peculiar, subdued rumbling like that of a distant thunder.

What could be the meaning of it? Let us go back and see.

CHAPTER IX.

UNEARTHED.

FOR some time after the departure of Ned upon his mission, the trio—Mrs. Hall, Emma and Finley—remained in that portion of the treasure-cave, half-hoping, half-fearing, they scarcely knew what. But then with an effort they left the entrance of the narrow tunnel, and proceeded slowly toward the other extremity, as it was by this entrance that Ned was to return.

The hours crept slowly and drearily by, and their hearts were racked with suspense. They little imagined the real danger their messenger was braving, but imagined a thousand difficulties that might detain him.

Their anxiety precluded all conversation, and they sat in silence. Fifty times they glanced upward at the boulder-closed entrance to see if it was not yet nightfall.

At one of these glances Pet Pete uttered an exclamation in a low tone, and rose as if about to spring forward. He had caught sight of a shadow moving over one of the narrow crevices, and fancied that he recognized the leg of a man. Thinking that it was Ned returned, Finley's first impulse was to rush forward and call him aloud by name, but upon second thought he paused.

Providence had aided them wonderfully so far, and he would not run the risk of marring all by precipitate action now. And crouching forward he listened with painful intentness; but all was silence.

Had Ned failed in his quest, and returned alone? That was by no means likely, as he was not a man to be daunted so easily, and besides, were it indeed him, he would have given the agreed-upon signal. No, it could not be him!

Motioning the women to maintain a perfect silence and their position, Finley stole cautious-

ly up the steep slope and gained a perch close to the boulder, feeling assured that he could not be seen, although objects without were plainly visible to him. Peering through one of the cracks, Finley, to his alarm and intense disgust, distinguished the copper-hued forms of several Indians, and likewise found that there was one of them seated upon the boulder beneath which he was crouching; and that it was of his leg that he had caught a glimpse.

This was a startling discovery, and one as well that threatened to disconcert their plans seriously. Finley did not doubt but what they were the same party that had been the indirect cause of their discovering the treasure-cave, and if so, they must entertain a suspicion that the fugitives were concealed somewhere in this vicinity, and had resolved to have vengeance for the death of their comrades.

As Finley was deliberating upon what was the best course to pursue, the savage seated upon the boulder immediately above him, commenced tapping lightly upon it with his hatchet, while conversing with his comrades. Then, by one of those strange freaks of fortune, the weapon slipped from his hand and fell down through the largest crevice, narrowly missing Finley, and then sliding with a clattering ring down the inclined plane, paused almost at the feet of the two women.

Finley heard the savage utter a grant of wonder and vexation, and hastily shrunk back into the gloom as the Indian's face was placed to the aperture, and his keen black eyes peered into the cave.

As quick as the face was withdrawn, and he could hear the Indians conversing with his fellows, Pet Pete noiselessly ran down and recovered the weapon, and then placed it where the light from without shone in upon it. He felt assured that the owner of it would not suffer the loss without an effort at recovery, and that he would try to remove the boulder.

Did he succeed in doing so, and thus reveal the cave secret, it was not likely that the savages would refrain from exploring it, in the hope of discovering their lost prey; but if the weapon was found at once, they *might* not think of searching further. It was with this vain hope that Finley acted as he did, and then rejoining his pale and trembling companions he quickly explained the disaster to them.

They drew back to the first turn, ready for flight if such a course should prove necessary, and awaited the progress of events. With their thorough knowledge of the cave they hoped to be able to baffle their enemy without coming into conflict with them; at least until the longed-for return of Payson.

They could faintly hear the efforts of the savages to remove the boulder, and as minute after minute passed by without the enemy's succeeding, hope revived within their breasts. But it was doomed to a speedy death.

The crack gradually grew larger, and the boulder was suddenly turned over and went thundering down the hillside. But the fugitives heeded not that, for with a loud yell one of the savages tumbled headlong into the hole and rolled swiftly down the rocky plane, heels over head, landing finally upon the soft, dry ground,

unharméd save a few bruises, but terribly alarmed.

So sudden was this acrobatic performance that Emma uttered a loud shriek of terror. As if in answer to this there arose a series of wild, exultant yells from without, but hoping that these were only called forth by the discovery of the cave, and that the cries of the fallen Indian had drowned the unfortunate shriek, Finley hastily retreated further into the depths of the cave.

Knowing every foot of the way he paused not until they were safe within the entrance of the tunnel by which Ned had emerged, and then cautioning his companions not to move until he came back, Pet Pete cautiously retraced his footsteps to spy further the proceedings of the enemy. Keeping his weapon drawn and ready for instant use, he gained the turn in safety, and now aided by the broad light of day shining in at the hole beyond, he beheld nearly a score of Indians standing together and eagerly consulting.

In a few moments several of the red-skins left the cave, while the others drew to one side and carefully examined their weapons. Shortly the others reappeared bearing armfuls of pine-knots which were distributed among the crowd and shortly ignited.

Finley could doubt no longer that their presence was either known or else strongly suspected, when the torch-bearers bent over the soft sand-covered floor, as if searching for footprints. Then with exultant grunts the trail of the fugitives was taken up, and the party advanced, a number of them holding their weapons in readiness for use, while the others led the way upon the tell-tale footprints.

The Roving Miner, rendered desperate by the turn affairs had taken, leveled his revolver and took a quick aim at the foremost red-skin, but reason returning, he paused. The death of one or even of half a dozen of the savages would avail nothing so long as the others remained, and would only render the fate of the fugitives all the more certain in case of capture, as he could not hope to cope successfully with them all.

His only hope now was that the savages might become bewildered by the various trails that had been made by the fugitives during their explorations, as there was no perceptible difference in them, thanks to the yielding sand, and thus the search be protracted until the return of Payson with assistance. Acting upon this hope, Finley rapidly retreated, and when he was near the tunnel endeavored to obliterate his trail, as well as those made previously, and rejoined his companions.

They crawled along the narrow passage with the women in front—that is, furthest from the interior of the cave—until the entrance was nearly reached, intending in case of close pursuit to emerge and trust to flight among the hills. Finley did not dare attempt this other than as a final resort, for he felt confident that most of the savages were on guard without, as their number was considerably less than when they had been seen upon the hill.

Meantime the savages had kept slowly advancing, and as if by instinct had kept the main

passage, avoiding the side galleries for the present. The numerous footprints baffled them considerably, as they could not distinguish the last made from the older ones, owing to the sands having fallen down toward the center.

The pale-faces could hear the sounds gradually drawing nearer, and could at length distinguish the faint rays of the torches carried by the savages. Thus the hope that they had faintly cherished of the trail-hunters being led astray in some of the numerous and intricate side-passages, was banished.

It would be the height of folly to remain any longer where they were, as the abrupt ending of the main passage would naturally divert attention to the side-tunnels, of which the one occupied by the fugitives was the very first. And nothing seemed to remain for them but instant flight.

"Mrs. Hall," whispered Finley to the elder woman who was at the end closest to the outer world, "please creep along until you reach the outside, and then without showing yourself through the bushes more than absolutely necessary, try to discover whether there are any of the enemy within the valley, in sight. I would go, but can not pass you."

The brave woman crept stealthily along the tunnel, and in a few moments returned, saying that so far as she could tell the valley and the hills were free from occupation. There was no time to lose as the savages had already reached the abyss terminating the cavern, and were earnestly conversing as if in doubt what course to pursue next.

Encouraging the two women, Finley brought up the rear noiselessly, and in a few moments reached the narrow mouth of the tunnel, that was surrounded by a dense screen of bushes and vines. Cautiously peering forth from these, Finley beheld nothing to arouse his suspicions, at first glance.

Almost directly opposite this point, he saw that the face of the hillside was covered with a thick, tangled growth of vines and underbrush, extending for some distance in every direction. Then as he turned his gaze down the valley, he started with a shock of mingled hope and fear.

What occasioned this was the sight of a considerable body of horsemen who had just entered the valley, headed apparently directly toward the spot where the three fugitives were concealed. But the fancy that these were the men sought for by Ned, was quickly and rudely dispelled, for Finley could tell by their dress and equipage that the new-comers were of the same class that had already caused them so much trouble.

He turned to re-enter the tunnel, but again paused in dismay. He could hear the sound of footsteps approaching from that direction, and knew that the bloodthirsty Indians were following close upon his trail! Between two fires, he knew not what to do.

One glance without decided him. The Mexicans had turned a slight bend, and were almost entirely out of sight, though still approaching. Bidding the women to follow him closely, and as noiselessly as possible, Pet Pete led the way through the bushes across the narrow valley, and darted into the mass of undergrowth already referred to, where he placed his compan-

ions behind him in a spot partially sheltered by a huge boulder, and drew his weapons, with a stern despair expressed upon his pale, set features.

A few words may be necessary to account for what follows, as also how it happened that three such considerable bodies of men could be in such close proximity without suspecting the presence of each other.

The hill that contained this treasure-cave formed an elbow, as it were, in a long chain of similar ones, or much like the base of a broad letter V. From the inner angles of this the four travelers had begun their ascent, and in the valley upon the left-hand side (and the right), they had first discovered the outlaws, led by Sevalio, and afterward, the red-skins. Near the lower right-hand corner was the second entrance of the cave, called "the tunnel," for distinction.

The men led by Ned were approaching by one valley, owing to his *detour*, and the new-comers, sighted by Finley, along another, with an intervening ridge. From this point the entrance upon the hillside was not visible, and all of the savages remaining in the immediate neighborhood had entered the cave, as already detailed.

The body of Mexicans were those under the outlaw chief—he who had been mistaken by Ned for Louis Dupuy, until he had heard him addressed as Joaquin—who had chased the Roving Miner in vain, and who was now searching the country for the runaway Clarissa and her lover. Just as they rounded the curve and came in full view of the bushes that concealed the tunnel, several of the Indians bearing torches broke out into the open air with cries of disappointment.

The two parties observed each other at the same moment, and the savages retreated to their covert. One of the outlaws called his leader's attention to the fact, but the momentary glimpse had not told them who or what the figures really were, only that they were human.

"Give them a shot, men, and then run in! We'll soon see who they are," cried the outlaw leader, dashing forward as he fired into the shrubbery.

Leaving a couple of men to mind the horses, the outlaws dashed through the shrubbery, and seeing the tumult and hearing the confused scrambling within, pressed recklessly onward, burning with curiosity and excitement. They could see the vanishing rays of torches, and picked up one that still burned upon the ground where it had been dropped by one of the wounded savages, as the fresh blood upon the knot proclaimed.

The Mexicans suddenly emerged into a large apartment and paused in wonder. There was no human being to be seen, but there were several blazing torches thrust into the soft sand floor, that cast a bright ruddy light upon their forms and over the glittering walls of the treasure-cave.

Then as if by magic a thundering roar, accompanied by a dazzling line of flame, burst from the gloom beyond, and a volley of rifle-bullets tore through their closely-crowded ranks. It was this discharge that had met the ears of Payson and his comrades at the hillside entrance and that had filled them with such great alarm for the fate of their friends.

The outlaw leader shouted:

"Forward, men, and give the cowards blazes!" and leading the assault in person, dashed into the darkness after their unseen enemy.

CHAPTER X.

HAND TO HAND.

AN expression of horror overspread the Roving Miner's face as he heard the significant sound, and for a moment he stood as if stupefied. But only for a moment, and then he shouted:

"Come on, men—follow me! Our friends are in trouble and need our help—God grant that it may not be too late!"

Without a word the hardy emigrants followed his hasty lead down the steep ascent, into the bowels of the earth; without pausing to calculate the odds they might be called upon to meet, or vouchsafing one thought of the dangers that threatened themselves. They only remembered that those who had been their companions, and for whom they had searched so long and laboriously, were in trouble; and that was enough.

Keeping close upon Ned's footsteps, who knew every inch of the way, they rushed forward with drawn and ready weapons. Suddenly they heard the tramp of rapidly approaching footsteps, and pausing, Ned called out in a loud tone:

"Who goes there—Pete, is it you?"

The several yells of dismay that followed this summons but too plainly revealed the identity of the strangers, and a quick volley was fired in the direction of their voices. That it was not altogether powder burned in vain, the loud, shrill shrieks of mortal agony evidenced, and through the strong glare the dusky forms of half a score of savages were faintly revealed, and with loud cheers the emigrants rushed forward.

The Indians appeared stupefied by the appearance of this new foe, and while some turned and fled in the direction from whence they had come, others grappled desperately with their white foes. Ned hurled one of the enemy violently aside, and rushed onward, calling aloud upon the name of Finley, of Emma, and of Mrs. Hall, but the echo of his own voice was the only answer.

He feared the worst and was rendered almost frantic, as was the agonized father and husband, who kept close to the young miner's side. Now they heard the sound of renewed firing before them, and could distinguish the bright flash of firearms.

Then the confused struggling of a number of men was revealed, at the further extremity of the cave, by the broad glare of several pine knots. Despite the smoke and dust that enveloped the combatants, the emigrants could plainly see that they were Mexicans and Indians, and knowing that they could be no others than their enemies as well, poured a deadly volley of pistol-balls into the densely crowded mass.

As if by mutual consent the two parties closed their struggles and turned in dismay. Allowing them no time for thought, however, Payson led his men on with a rush, firing rapidly the while with loud hurrahs!

More than one of the affrighted enemy, either

ignorant or forgetful of the yawning gulf so close behind them, turned and rushed headlong into its frightful depths, their cries of horror dying away in the far distance. Then as if with one accord they all, Mexicans and savages, crowded against each other in their affright as they plunged into the narrow tunnel, still followed by the death-dealing shots.

Their yells and curses were frightful as they became jammed together in the contracted passage, and it seemed as though their herculean struggles would carry the sides of the hill before them bodily. But then in a dreadful state, they emerged into the open air.

Begrimed with powder, smoke and dust, bleeding from bullet or knife-wounds, or the cruel rents from the sharp, jagged rocks in the passage, they were miserable-looking objects indeed! But where were the horses they had left in the valley?

A wild cry of despair broke from the lips of the outlaws, as they saw that they were gone—that they had all vanished! And on the spot where they had been left, were now only the ghastly forms of the two guards, dead!

How did all this occur? It is easily explained.

When Finley saw how narrowly they had escaped being caught between two fires, he was nearly overcome, and sunk back from his loophole, pale and trembling. He heard the volley and the shouts of the outlaw leader, but as these last were in Spanish, he did not understand their import.

But hearing the confused rush, Pete rallied and peered once more from his leafy observatory. The outlaws had disappeared, but the still agitated bushes told him that they had entered into the tunnel, and then the neigh of a horse called his attention down the defile. He saw that the animals were left in charge of only two men, and a glow of desperate resolve lighted up his face.

Pete slowly and stealthily began gliding through the underbrush toward the unsuspecting outlaws.

What little noise he made was effectually drowned by the horses' trampling, and then he paused within a dozen yards of the two men. With a quick but accurate aim Finley fired, and then the nearest man reeled in his saddle and fell heavily to the ground.

Darting swiftly forward, Peter served the second outlaw in the same way, before he had recovered sufficiently from his astonishment to either defend himself or raise the alarm. The horses did not appear to be greatly frightened, evidently being well accustomed to the smell of burnt powder, and the young miner had but little difficulty in securing three of their number, whose appearance he fancied the most.

Calling in low tones to the mother and daughter, Finley speedily assisted them to mount, and then, driving the entire cavalcade before them, the fugitives fled at headlong speed down the valley, fleeing alike from friends and foes.

Alas! had they only comprehended what the real facts of the case were, how differently would they have acted!

As we have said, the Mexicans were terribly

surprised at finding their animals had vanished. A general cry of terror and despair broke from their lips as they realized the full force of this calamity.

How large a force was that which had surprised them, whether white or red, they had no means of knowing, but certainly it was numerous enough to cause their destruction if met hand-to-hand. As if to dispirit them still further, upon glancing hurriedly around, their leader was not to be seen. Was Joaquin dead, wounded, or only a prisoner?

As for the savages, they had had no such expectation, and did not hesitate the moiety of an instant, but fled at topmost speed over the rocky hills or by the easier route down the valley. And close upon their footsteps came the Mexican outlaws, and behind them, again pressed the emigrants, flushed with victory and burning with vengeance for such of their comrades as had fallen within the cave.

Payson and Hall both called upon them to stop and abandon the chase, lest they should become separated and either lost, or be drawn into some ambush. And besides, where were Finley, and his two companions?

The Roving Miner, with heart throbbing painfully, hastened into the depths of the cavern, snatching up a lighted torch, and made the innermost recesses echo with the sound of his voice, calling upon those who were even then far away, and momentarily increasing the distance between themselves and those whom they would have given almost anything to have met.

He had traversed the entire length of the subterranean passage, it is needless to say, without success, and was slowly returning, still continuing his shouts, when he was met by Hall, who appeared to be in a state of the greatest excitement. He called out eagerly:

"They are not here, so come—quick!"

"What! have you found them?"

"Yes, no; but the men saw three figures upon horseback not long since, riding out from the valley below, and are almost certain that two of them were women."

"It must have been they, then—but come! we have no time to lose. They do not know the danger that threatens them, and may run direct into the encampment of these outlaws. It is not far from here," and as Ned spoke the two men rapidly retraced their steps toward the tunnel.

All of a sudden a bright flash shot out from one side of the gloomy passage, a loud report accompanying it, and with a cry of agony, Edward Payson fell heavily forward, extinguishing the torch and enveloping all in intense darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

REUNITED.

PETER FINLEY, riding between his two companions, dashed at full speed down the deep, narrow valley, driving the snorting and terrified horses before them in a confused clump, and soon emerged into the level plain. They were intensely excited and thought only of putting the greatest possible distance between themselves and their two-fold enemies, never thinking of

glancing behind them until the golden opportunity was passed.

For several miles they sped onward, keeping close in the rear of the riderless horses, who seemed to choose the easiest course and dash ahead as if toward some certain point. This idea at length occurred to Finley, and he abruptly drew rein.

"What is the matter, Mr. Finley?" anxiously asked Mrs. Hall, as the two women followed his example.

"You see how well these horses keep together? You know Arkansaw said that Joaquin probably had his rendezvous near here, and I believe that it is so—that these very men belonged to his band, if indeed he was not with them in person. Then what more likely than that these horses would make the best of their way back to their quarters?"

"You may be right—nay, I believe that you are so. And we were riding directly upon captivity, if not certain death! We owe our lives to you once more, dear friend," agitatedly replied Mrs. Hall, bending over with outstretched hand.

"It is nothing—nothing at all; only I should have thought of it sooner than I did," said Finley, gazing earnestly into the dark eyes of Emma. "But we must not hesitate here; every moment is fraught with danger."

"But where shall we go? You know that your friend will look for us at the cave; ought we to abandon the vicinity altogether? We are lost, as it is, and may ride into danger rather than away from it."

"Right again, Mrs. Hall, as you always are. It is *you* who save us all, not me. We will ride over yonder to the left and climb that high hill. We can conceal ourselves and see around us. Then if Ned does succeed in finding your friends, we will be apt to observe him as they pass by."

Acting upon this hint the three wanderers turned their horses' heads toward the designated point, and proceeded at a more moderate pace. When they glanced around, the riderless horses were just disappearing into the dark depths of a defile, and the suspicion entertained was still further strengthened.

The base of the hill was finally reached, and while the women concealed themselves among a clump of trees, Finley dismounted and advanced upon foot to reconnoiter. He advanced cautiously and with anxious heart, for he had seen so many enemies of late that it seemed as though they were to be met with at every turn.

The better to take advantage of the cover, the young miner advanced up the hill in a circuitous route, keenly scrutinizing every feature of the hill, and the plain and valley below as well, so far as the fast-gathering twilight would admit. And then he paused with a feeling of despair, for he knew that the hill was occupied. He could distinguish a tall, dark form standing amid the bushes, with outstretched arms, and then came the challenge before he had determined whether it was a white man or a red.

"Who are you, stranger, and what do you want, sneaking around here in this way?"

It was a strong, hearty voice, but unmistakably American, and the young miner's heart

beat wildly for joy. They were fellow countrymen, and of course friends.

"I am a friend, if you are honest men; but, if not, fire!"

"Good! you talk bold enough, so come out and let's see if your looks correspond," laughed the sentinel, lowering his revolver.

Finley knew that it would not be wise to neglect this hint, as the strangers were in amply sufficient numbers to enforce it as a command, if needful, and so he nimbly scaled the bench, and with an undaunted air of conscious self-respect, stood before them. The strangers, some half a dozen in number, all crowded around the young miner, who returned their looks with interest.

He saw that they were mostly young men, who had the appearance of being gentlemen, despite their soiled and tattered garments. That they were miners he saw at a glance, and this fact still further reassured him.

"Well," at length said Pet Pete, with a smile, "what do you think of me?"

"That you are not exactly the sort of man we expected to see, but you are all the more welcome for that. What is your lay—prospecting?"

"No. I am a fugitive from the Indians, and from Joaquin's band of cut-throats; and I have with me two women who are in the same box. We have been hunting for their friends for nearly a week now."

"Their names—the women, I mean?" eagerly asked one of the men.

"Mrs. Hall and her daughter, who were—"

"Who were stolen from an emigrant train! Just so, and now give me your hand, old fellow, and pardon our suspicions. We know that you are all right, after all."

"What do you mean?" asked Pete, as the strangers pressed around, and warmly greeted him.

"That we have met Mr. Hall, who is searching for these women, and he told us how they were lost."

"When did you see him? Was Ned with them?—quick!"

"Ned—Ned who?"

"Ned Payson, the Roving Miner; he—"

"Do you know anything of him? Is he alive and well?—thunder and blazes, man, can't you speak?" almost yelled the miner leader.

"What! are you friends of his, who—"

"Exactly—he became separated from us, and we have been hunting for him ever since."

"Well, I know that he was alive this morning. But what an idiot I am! Here I have been gone a good hour, and they must be terribly alarmed. Do you think it will be safe for them up here?"

"Not one of us but would perish before harm came to the poor creatures," warmly cried John Morford, as he had introduced himself. "But come, I will go with you, and help them up the hill."

This was quickly carried out, and the great suspense of the two women was dispelled at once when they realized that they were once more with friends. Food—rude but palatable—was furnished them, and gratefully partaken of, after their fatigue and anxiety, and then their plans for the future were discussed.

"How many of them were there altogether?" asked Morford.

"Not over twenty each, if so many."

"And you think that they had a fight?"

"I know it, for we heard the shots."

"Then they are less, as a matter of course, and I think we are good for the lot. Now Ned will assuredly return, either alone or with assistance, and he must find us there. So I move we return to a short distance from the place, and conceal the ladies, while two of us go ahead and reconnoiter."

After some little discussion this plan was finally agreed upon, and the descent was begun. The women were once more placed on horseback, and the little party proceeded as noiselessly as possible toward the treasure-cave, under lead of Finley.

The hill entrance was chosen, for several reasons, and although the night was dark, they experienced but little difficulty in reaching the desired spot. Leaving one man with the women, in charge of the horses, and with directions to flee directly to the spot where the two parties had met, in case of danger, the remainder, six in all, cautiously advanced and quickly gained the mouth of the subterranean cavity.

They scouted around some little time, and then, satisfied that there were no enemies concealed near, bent over the hole, and listened intently for some moments. Then with quickly beating hearts, they descended the steep plane, and stood upon the soft, sandy floor.

Knowing the folly of bearing a lighted torch, and feeling confident of his ability to guide them through the darkness, Finley advanced first, closely followed by his new comrades with drawn weapons.

At length there became faintly visible in the hazy distance the rays of a light, and advancing with increased caution, Finley soon perceived that it came from a couple of torches. Just at the outer line of light, the miners could distinguish the shapes of several ghastly-looking bodies, and the garments that were flung over their faces, told that they were dead.

A little to one side crouched several men, one of them bending over a form clad in a bright-red shirt, and as the torches flickered up more brightly, Pet Pete saw that it was that of his friend and comrade, Ned Payson. A low cry of horror broke from his lips that attracted the attention of the watchers, who instantaneously glided out into the thick, murky darkness.

"Who comes there?" uttered a strong, deep voice accompanied by several clicks as of weapons being cocked.

"Don't fire—we are friends!" called out Finley.

"Stop, or I fire! Who are you that claim to be friends?"

"We are friends of that man lying yonder—Ned Payson, and also of Charles Hall."

"Then come forward where the light shines on you, but remember that a dozen pistols are ready if you mean treachery," added the concealed voice.

The miners advanced as directed, and then, as if satisfied, the watchers came forward and met them.

"Is he dead?" said Finley, crouching beside

the motionless form of the young miner. "Thank God, he lives!" and then his feelings overcame him and he wept aloud.

"Where is Hall?" asked Morford. "His wife and daughter are out yonder with one of our men."

"He has gone to search for them; but are they safe and well? How did it happen, and where did you find them?" eagerly queried the emigrant.

The desired information was quickly given, and then one of the men dispatched in quest of the father, while another undertook to bring up the two women. Peter found to his great joy that Ned had only been seriously stunned by the treacherous shot of his unseen foe, and that the bullet had only glanced from the side of his head, tearing the scalp fearfully, but that there was no serious danger to be apprehended.

When Payson fell as if dead, Hall had called aloud for help, and rushed to procure another light. He felt some person dash past him and flee down the main passage of the cave, but he did not dare follow in pursuit, not knowing who or how many he would have to encounter, and so the would-be assassin had effected his escape.

For a few moments it was thought that the Roving Miner had received his death-blow, and the emigrant leader was sorely puzzled as to what course to pursue. He disliked to abandon the man who had been of so much service to him and his, but then when he thought of the dangers that might still be threatening those most dear to his heart, he left several of his men as guard, and set off with the remainder in the direction that the fugitive had been noticed to take. The hard, flinty ground gave no indication as to whether the fugitives had taken that direction or no, but as it was the easiest and most free from obstacles, it would seem the course most likely to be chosen. And then it led into a deep narrow defile, along which they unhesitatingly dashed.

This was none other than the one alluded to so frequently by etofore: the one where the little army of Arkansaw had been annihilated, where Ned Payson had so narrowly escaped death, and the one leading directly upon the outlaw rendezvous. Then the sturdy emigrants emerged into the valley.

Their approach caused not the slightest appearance of alarm, however, and although the white tents were still visible, and the fires still burned, there was not a living soul to be seen.

Hall and his men dashed through the encampment and made a careful but hurried search, finding no trace, however, of those whom they sought. Then they turned and slowly rode out of the pass back the way they had come, feeling heart-sick with so many disappointments.

Not very long after leaving the narrow defile, Hall's party was met by a single horseman, who breathlessly announced the glad tidings, of the lost women being found; that they were alive and well, and doubtless at that very moment within the treasure-cave, awaiting the return of their husband—father.

The entrance of the tunnel was quickly reached, and leaping from his horse Hall dashed into the cave, and with a loud cry of joy was clasped in the arms of his wife and daughter.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

WE cannot dwell at length upon the subsequent adventures of our friends, though they were by no means devoid of interest; but enough has been detailed to convey an idea of what life was at the gold mines of California, when the excitement had gained its height, and when Joaquin pursued his bloody work of retaliation and revenge.

We have alluded to the conversation between Joaquin and his wife, Clarissa, and also one in which Luis Cardoza (or Dupuy) took a part. And the service that Dupuy had rendered the outlaw mistress had emboldened her to broach a project.

It was that he should assume Joaquin's rank and name, while they should flee from the band and fulfill their intention of abandoning their perilous life to live in their own country under assumed names. For reasons of his own, Dupuy consented, and thus it was the *real* Joaquin that had fled with Clarissa, not Dupuy, as supposed.

Their flight was successful, for Dupuy directed his men to search in every direction but the right one, according to his understanding with Murieta, and the fugitives succeeded in reaching Sonora, where they settled down as peaceful stock-growers.

It was Dupuy that led the outlaws at the cave, and when his men fled, had secreted himself within one of the side-passages, from whence he had discharged the murderous shot at his hated rival, Edward Payson, and then fled, returning to the rendezvous, where he almost met the party under Hall.

Thinking that his successful rival was dead, he started for San Francisco, but falling in with one of the sections of his band, could not shake them off without exciting suspicion, and once more assumed the name and role of Joaquin Murieta. Some time about the first of August, 1852, his party fell in with the Rangers of Captain Harry Love, and Dupuy (Joaquin) and most of his men were killed, including "Three-fingered Jack."

When Mr. Hall and his companions came to realize the vast extent of the treasure-cave's richness, a number of them resolved to stay and work the mine, instead of continuing their journey to Oregon. As Ned was one of the first discoverers, and unable to work, they set aside a portion for him, and at the commencement of cold weather all found themselves rich, even beyond their utmost expectations.

The Hall family, together with "Pet Pete and Ned, the Roving Miner" then set out for San Francisco, where they arrived in safety, and not long afterward there was a grand double wedding, at which the two latter, Emma Hall and Carrie Lee were the principal parties.

All their endeavors to find the wife of the ill-fated miner, John Allison, were ended by hearing of her death, and as she left no relations, either upon her own or her husband's side, the golden treasure was divided between the two young couples.

THE END.

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